



Claude Ranger: Canadian Jazz Legend. By Mark Miller.
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Mark Miller's reputation as the premier writer on Canadian jazz has been secure for some decades, and this august tribute to one of our greatest musicians in any idiom is further testimony to his eminence. I should state at the outset that Miller is a friend, and mine is one of hundreds of informant testimonies that formed his source material, because I am one of the many who were profoundly influenced by the ideas and practices of Claude Ranger. In a way, what makes me most happy about this wonderfully realized project is that it will bring the reader, too, a sense of the true multi-

faceted brilliance and impact of Claude Ranger. From the outset, beginning with his own encounters with this master musician on and off stage, Mark Miller understood that Monsieur Ranger was a figure of great significance in Canadian artistic history. This book attempts to give the reader a sense of the breadth and depth of his impact. Forgoing musical examples for the sake of accessibility, the book succeeds on Miller's narrative skill and dedication to creating a convincing portrait of the artistic majesty and human sadness of his subject. It is sad testimony to the state of music historiography that Miller's work is self-published.

Although the book also offers some tantalizing images of the Canadian jazz scene in the various times and places that Ranger studied, lived, and worked—Montreal in the 1950s and '60s, Toronto in the '70s and '80s, Vancouver in the '90s—the focus is squarely on Ranger and his artistic development. Ranger told me that he was slyly tricked into finding his native fanatical devotion to music by a perceptive high school band leader, who recognized his talent but studiously underpraised his efforts, compelling him to work harder every year. By the early '60s he had entered Montreal's unsteady jazz scene, still hanging on but about to be eclipsed among young French and English listeners by the rock revolution. Along the way, he had taught himself piano, and not only learned music theory and composition but, by the late '60s, had developed a striking and original music theory. His theory was initially oriented to the



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performance of his own music (and an explanation of its rationale), but like all significant theory contributions, it was fundamental in scope and conception. He eventually created a series of elaborate exercise books for individual instruments to help musicians to learn his conception. Like so much of the music he created, these books are now thought to be lost.

Miller explains how Radio-Canada's *Jazz en liberté* broadcast series furnished a valuable outlet for Claude's composing and bandleading talents, as he continued to make his living playing drums for other jazz groups and, at various times, performing in the wedding and show bands that were the bread and butter of working musicians at the time. His musical disdain for these pedestrian engagements didn't and probably couldn't prevent his brilliance from shining through. Not only did he bring a startling invention to the execution of commercial music's humdrum patterns, he also composed numerous commercial dances such as cha-chas, bossa novas, and mambos, in the simple and straightforward language of their idiom, but always tinged with the harmonic and melodic creativity of his writing altogether.

Miller does an admirable job of exploring Ranger's work in all its facets, through careful attention to every form of available documentation and research. This is a biography in the full sense. Miller documents the difficult personal journey of Claude Ranger's life without sensationalism, euphemism, or apology. He tells the story of Ranger's life with a candour that should not, I expect, give much fodder to the more maudlin schools of biographical thinking. He neither revels in nor denies the difficult problems of alcohol and painkiller dependencies, nor does he romanticize them—with the one, eminently forgivable exception of Ranger's remarkable and celebrated habit of chain-smoking while keeping all four limbs furiously engaged in drumming performance!

This book is certainly a major milestone in Canadian jazz history and biography, and a worthy tribute to a genuinely profound musical creator. To my mind, Miller's felicitous solutions to the challenges of balancing the personal, artistic, and historical dimensions of a biography are exemplary, and this book, like Ranger's life and work, deserves to be widely known. I know already of younger musicians and jazz lovers who did not know about Ranger who have been inspired by the book to educate themselves and to rededicate themselves to their craft.

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