

BOOK REVIEW

Learning Jazz: Jazz Education, History, and Public Pedagogy. By Ken Prouty. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2023. 244pp. \$110.00 hardcover / \$30.00 paperback.

FUMI TOMITA

Concerns about the state and definition of jazz have been circulating in scholarly and popular discourse for many decades. In *Learning Jazz: Jazz Education, History, and Public Pedagogy*, Ken Prouty examines how jazz stays relevant by analyzing a network of formal and informal spaces where people learn about the music. In addition to studying the history of institutionalized jazz education, Prouty uncovers other important educational discourses in early pedagogical publications of the 1920s, in less canonical—and sometimes altogether lost—voices in jazz’s history, and in more mainstream contemporary media such as film and X accounts. “Jazz learning,” as he calls it, shapes and continually reworks different yet equally valuable understandings of the music’s essential character.

Thoroughly researched and often highly original, *Learning Jazz* comprises five chapters organized chronologically from the music’s “nascent pedagogical discourse” to the twenty-first century’s more public forms of musicological mass media (12). Drawing on his experience as a trombonist, Prouty first analyzes early jazz trombone method books in chapter one, “To Jazz, or Not to Jazz”—in particular, the role of the glissando and other novelty effects in defining jazz as a stylistic approach instead of a genre. He addresses this body of work in great detail, scrutinizing publications by Henry Fillmore, Mayhew Lake, and Fortunato Sordillo in 1919 and those published by well-known jazz trombonists Miff Mole, Glenn Miller, and Tommy Dorsey, who capitalized on their popular recordings with instructional manuals in the mid-to-late 1920s. Prouty’s extensive primary source analysis demonstrates how the standardization of musical language, terminology, and even book covers communicate varied conceptions of the genre at a time when there was not yet a general consensus on how to define jazz.

In chapter two, “We Don’t Know What We Don’t Know,” Prouty turns to jazz history’s so-called “lost voices.” Drawing on Sherrie Tucker’s feminist challenge to the exclusion of women musicians from history, Prouty demonstrates how historiographical choices can reflect an unspoken bias

through omission. Prouty uses the writings of *Downbeat* critic Paul Eduard Miller from the 1930s and 1940s and the perspective of non-canonical “ordinary musicians” to supplement ongoing revisions to jazz history like those made by Tucker. A relatively unknown critic, Miller understood that jazz was fundamentally Black music and was an advocate for higher critical standards. Miller’s ideas are also preserved in two unpublished manuscripts held at the Center for Black Music Research. (Here, Prouty’s rigorous archival research really shines.) Ultimately, however, it was Marshall Stearns who led the way towards institutionalizing jazz, and Prouty speculates that Miller was perhaps too opinionated and one-sided to appeal to a broader audience. Prouty then turns his attention to performers and how our perception of jazz history and jazz musicians has been formed through a “fascination with genius” (70). Borrowing Malcolm Gladwell’s term “outliers” to describe “genius” musicians, Prouty argues that the careers of the ordinary journeyman have a lot to teach us about jazz. To demonstrate, he singles out Charles D. Johnson—a trumpet player in Louis Armstrong’s “Hot Harlem Band,” featured in a 1933 short film made by Armstrong. Johnson’s blip on the jazz history map, according to Prouty, sheds as much light on Armstrong as an “outlier” as it does the menagerie of jazz people who made the music’s history.

Jazz education in high schools and colleges is covered in the next two chapters. In chapter three, “Sight-Reading, Virtuosity, and Identity,” Prouty focuses on Stan Kenton and Maynard Ferguson and their subsequent hegemony in higher education. Kenton was an early advocate, participating in jazz band competitions and camps and forming a relationship with North Texas State University (now called The University of North Texas and hereafter, NTSU). Led by Leon Breiden, NTSU developed into a premier jazz program, one based on principles advocated by Kenton including the emphasis and importance of sightreading. Prouty turns to NTSU’s 1967 recording of “Clams, Anyone?,” a track that was sightread by the college band in the studio, as a definite testament to the importance of sightreading. However, with the notion of jazz musicians being traditionally “ear” players, Prouty asks, “Should [sightreading] be privileged over other skills more attuned to the creation of successful improvised performance?” (91). Ultimately, he explicates the long history of Black musicians with exquisite reading skills while also suggesting that NTSU’s focus on reading might have functioned as a barrier to entry for students from underresourced high schools. The latter, he argues, has kept jazz education white-dominated.

Kenton’s complex relationship with racial diversity is analyzed at length in this chapter, and Prouty draws parallels between the lack of Black musicians in his bands and in the ones at NTSU. Prouty points out many factors that contributed to the problem including slow public desegregation in the Deep

South in the 1960s and disparities in public education funding. However, since Black musicians are still largely absent from jazz performance in higher education *over five decades later*, Prouty does not shy away from tough questions: “What kinds of barriers might Breeden and his peers, even unknowingly, have put into place that would give many white students a marked advantage in achieving success in collegiate jazz programs? And how might such ideas continue to impact the experiences of students and educators in the field?” (100).

Prouty then turns to Maynard Ferguson’s influence on the culture of high school big bands. Known for his phenomenal technique and expansive range, Ferguson became famous for his jazz-pop work from the late 1970s. Although critics dismissed his music for being flashy and over-the-top, he was quite popular with young jazz students (including Prouty), so much so that Ferguson’s daughter noted that “70 percent of [Ferguson’s] shows are in junior high schools, high schools, and colleges” (109). Ferguson’s career began with Kenton and his music shares many of the same qualities, including his band consisting exclusively, with some exceptions, of white musicians. But Ferguson focused on virtuosity, which according to Prouty, created an “even greater sense of exclusion in jazz education programs, centering young white men with... a laser-like focus” (120). Despite what may appear as criticism of such influential figures, Prouty does not necessarily assign blame to the likes of Ferguson or Breeden, stating that “intent is not really at issue here as much as impact” (121).

In the following chapter, “Understanding Jazz Education’s ‘Race Problem,’” Prouty tackles challenges to the racial exclusion of jazz performance pedagogy presented by collegiate Black big bands and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Prouty highlights the accomplishments of Malcolm X College Band (noted for its ties to racial and social justice) and Houston’s Kashmere Stage Band, who tied for first place in the All-American High School Stage Band Competition in Mobile, Alabama in 1972. Such bands stood out in the white-dominated band community in high schools and colleges during the 1970s, making Kashmere’s win in a deep South state a significant event.

Prouty’s discussion of Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) centers on The Essentially Ellington High School Jazz Band Competition and Festival. Led by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, JALC became known for its conservative vision of jazz, one rooted exclusively in blues and swing, that has been heavily criticized for promoting a reductive view of jazz. The criticism still resonates today, but given the skewed racial demographics of jazz’s educational institutions, JALC’s stylistic focus makes better sense and, for Prouty, critiques of the program should be reevaluated in this light. In this way, Essentially Ellington stands as a “counternarrative and corrective to a jazz education system that was seen as being dominated by white teachers and students, to say nothing of big band composers

and arrangers” (125). Unfortunately, Essentially Ellington suffers from the realities of systematic inequality where economically disenfranchised schools that are more racially diverse cannot compete with wealthier and whiter school districts.

One of the things that makes this book so timely and culturally significant is the final chapter, “Jazz People and Public Pedagogies.” Here, Prouty’s case studies extend beyond the confines of educational institutions and strictly defined jazz communities to consider more mainstream processes of “learning jazz.” (They also resonate with recent discussions about “public musicology”—a humanities movement designed to make music knowledge accessible to broader audiences outside of the elite, exclusive spaces of the ivory tower.) Prouty dissects recent events that capture how jazz is portrayed in media, especially in 2014—a low point in jazz history remembered for dwindling sales and parodies on social media (e.g., the X account @JazzIsTheWorst, which excoriated the music and perceptions of its communities) and elsewhere (Django Gold’s satire “Sonny Rollins...In His Own Words” published in the *New Yorker*, where “Rollins,” expressing career regret, explains why jazz is terrible). These highly public discourses prompt Prouty to examine more commonplace cultural moments where audiences are “taught” about jazz, such as the circulation of jazz as a metaphor for other enterprises (e.g., U.S. democracy efforts overseas or neoliberalism, as Dale Chapman argues in *The Jazz Bubble* (2018)) and the impact of Damien Chazelle’s movies, *Whiplash* (2014) and *La La Land* (2016). Though jazz critics and musicians alike deplored the movies for not accurately depicting their culture, Prouty provocatively raises questions about who gets to speak on behalf of the music: “Why should they not take their place in the story of the music, and what might we learn from them?” (195).

Prouty’s “Coda: What’s in a Doman Name?” captures the innovative yet nuanced work done by *Learning Jazz*. JALC’s website is jazz.org, problematically conflating their program with the whole of the genre. Demands to change the domain name by critics such as Nate Chinen launched heated debates about who gets to define jazz. Ultimately, as he argues throughout the book, Prouty cares more about impact than intention. And one of the impacts of this naming practice is the continued spirited debates that flourish along with the music: “But one thing is certain—as long as there are people who are passionate about this music, there will almost certainly be an effort to educate, to engage in new forms of public pedagogy and advocacy” (198).

The scholarship in *Learning Jazz* is excellent and if Prouty had chosen to focus solely on traditional jazz education, the book would still be vital to the field of jazz studies, as he presents a more nuanced understanding of these formalized institutional spaces. However, by arguing for the influence of more informal and

public sites where jazz is “taught,” he brings in culturally significant areas of influence that impact jazz education. Jazz is indeed a survivor genre, and Prouty should be commended for laying out the facts plain and simple without getting pessimistic about its future. *Learning Jazz* will ultimately be read and discussed primarily amongst jazz musicologists and historians, but jazz band directors stand to learn a lot about their field from this work as well.