

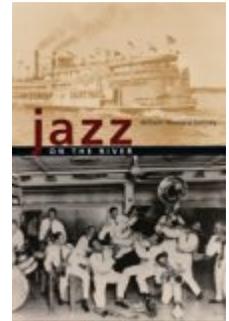
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



William Howland Kenney. *Jazz on the River*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xi + 237 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-43733-0.

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Published on H-Amstdy (January, 2006)



Padding Upstream

Jazz fans are familiar with the “Up the River from New Orleans” story of the development and spread of jazz. This book puts flesh on that story in demonstrating the role that river boats played in the development and spread of America’s greatest contribution to the arts. It is the product of many years of intensive labor and careful writing. It proves the wisdom of John Henry Cardinal Newman’s saying that hard writing makes easy reading.

Jazz on the River provides examples of how music came up the river; namely, on riverboats. As Kenney notes, when jazz came up the Mississippi it became part of popular culture and entered a new set of performing constraints. The music began to become “standardized” and defined. Kenney is at his best describing this process and the way in which Fate Marable and Louis Armstrong, among many others, worked into this process.

Young Armstrong, for example, continued his apprenticeship in music on the river. There he became part of a well-disciplined band, learning to read music as part of a unit, watching the way in which whites came to the music to be entertained. Many of these white fans went further, seeing these works as artistic productions, a notion of the music Armstrong kept till his death. He also knew that his version of the music demanded more of the artist; namely, a greater freedom for improvisation.

Nevertheless, training on the river helped develop the skills and provided experience for many famous jazz performers, among them Henry Red Allen, Howard Baker, Bix Beiderbecke, Jimmy Blanton, and Johnny St. Cyr. Many musicians, black and white, were offered splendid

opportunities to bring the new and developing music to ready audiences, audiences eager to hear it and through their enthusiasm to help spur it to new greatness.

Another contribution that Kenney makes is his description of the development of jazz in areas where the riverboats passed. Jazz communities in St. Louis and elsewhere provided new centers of jazz, fertile areas for its development. For jazz it was important that it continue its multicultural development, drawing inspiration from all the people of the country, and eventually the world. This was the spirit of Louis Armstrong as well as the riverboat culture he worked in the 1910s and 1920s.

The boats brought the new music to new areas. In turn, the music spread out to other areas, which in turn became centers for jazz. Chicago, for example, was not on the river but musicians brought the music to this center from which it spread to other areas, developing its own jazz idiom in the process.

This study fills in many gaps in the literature of jazz while covering the period from 1917 to 1960. *Jazz on the River* both simplifies and makes more complicated the early history of the music. Kenney writes clearly and moves the reader along at a fast pace. He explains how the music came up the river. At the same time, he demonstrates the way black and whites contributed to the music’s development. He shows how this interaction worked in ways often overlooked in the oversimplified folk histories of the music.

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Citation: Frank Salamone. Review of Kenney, William Howland, *Jazz on the River*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

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