



**Ted Gioia.** *The History of Jazz.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 471 pp.  
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New Orleans musicians at the turn of the century produced what may best be described as America's most influential export. From its genesis in the syncretism of African polyrhythms, blues, and ragtime, the birth of jazz created a musical revolution. With an acute sense for the intricacies and influences of this complex form of musical expression, jazz historian Ted Gioia, author of *West Coast Jazz* and *The Imperfect Art*, traces the development of the genre from Buddy Bolden to Wynton Marsalis.

Gioia does a competent job balancing together biographical sketches with cultural and historical background as he provides his own brand of musical criticism and insight. As Gioia makes clear, "In America, music was the first sphere of social interaction in which racial barriers were challenged and over-turned" (p. 125). Gioia focuses not only on big names like Duke Ellington but includes commentary on lesser acclaimed, though notable, musicians and composers such as the short-lived Herbie Nichols.

While the writing occasionally lacks the enthusiasm and flair of other jazz writers such as Al-

bert Murray, Gioia's criticism establishes its own authority. Speaking of Armstrong's work with the King Oliver Creole Band, Gioia has a keen sense of Armstrong's superior talents but rightly notes Armstrong's shortcomings in a band devoted to group cohesion. "In the context of his later recordings, with their emphasis on solo playing," Gioia writes, "this magnetic quality is an asset, but in the setting of the Creole Jazz Band it disrupts the seamless blending of instrumental voices that is the crowning glory of the early New Orleans style" (p. 51).

Another strength of the study is Gioia's ability to provide cultural commentary, which gives a fuller sense of how developments in American society, especially changes in race relations, influenced jazz expression. "It is impossible," he notes "to comprehend the free jazz movement of these same years [late 50s and early 60s] without understanding how it fed on this powerful cultural shift in American society" (p. 338). While these insights give a sound picture of the times, more such commentary would have strengthened other

sections that seem at times somewhat removed from their cultural context.

Given the scope and complexity of jazz music in the twentieth century, a "past which threatens to dwarf its present" (p. 394), Gioia provides beginners with a place to start understanding America's own unique form of musical expression. For jazz aficionados, Gioia discovers many significant connections as he traces influences through the years. Gioia makes clear the history of jazz is certainly impressive, yet with innovation a key to the form's evolution, such history is far from completed.

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