

## ANNOTATED JAZZ FILM CANON

*Films essential to the study of jazz and film*

by

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### 1. Hollywood films

*The Benny Goodman Story* (1955. Directed by Valentine Davies). A nearly complete collection of myths and misconceptions about jazz and the Swing Era. Young Benny, for example, hears Kid Ory's New Orleans group just seconds after his first sexual humiliation. When Ory tells the teenager that he and his men just "swing on out and play what we feel," Benny instantly gets it. Transforming his sexual hurt into music, Benny suddenly becomes an accomplished jazz improviser. Later, in a scene that is typical of Hollywood's ritual anointing of white jazz heroes, Ory reappears to tell the mature Benny that he has "the best band I ever heard anyplace."

*Cabin in the Sky* (1943. Directed by Vincente Minnelli). In a superb nightclub scene, Duke Ellington's orchestra and a group of dancers, many of whom had recently appeared in his groundbreaking stage show *Jump for Joy*, overturn the film's racist conception of black people as simple and god-fearing or crap-shooting and shiftless. "Going Up," a tune written especially for the film, combines a sermon-like trombone solo with call-and-response from the dancers and then a dizzying violin improvisation by Ray Nance. Seamlessly uniting the sacred and the profane, Ellington subtly undermines the film's naïve dichotomies.

*The Connection* (1961. Directed by Shirley Clarke). Based on a notorious play by Jack Gelber, this highly self-referential fantasy about the jazz life begins with a filmmaker offering to buy heroin for eight junkies waiting for their connection on the condition that he make a movie about their lives. With disastrous consequences, the filmmaker succumbs to the temptation to find out what all the fuss is about. Meanwhile, Jackie McLean and Freddie Redd appear as two of the junkies and weave their music into the film.

*Dingo* (1990. Directed by Rolf de Heer). Memorable for an unusual appearance by an aging (and clearly ailing) Miles Davis, the film was made just before his death and released just afterwards. An inexperienced but devoted Australian trumpeter travels to Paris to meet his idol Billy Cross (Miles). Somehow the innocence and enthusiasm of the young acolyte convinces Cross that he should return to playing after a long absence. Having scrupulously avoided all but the most carefully chosen venues for most of his career, Davis began an acting career late in life, somehow choosing to work with an inexperienced director in a low-budget film. Perhaps Davis took the role because it gave him an opportunity to play a highly idealized version of himself.

*The Gig* (1985. Directed by Frank D. Gilroy). An unusually thoughtful meditation on what happens when middle-class white men who play Dixieland in their rec rooms suddenly get a taste of the real jazz life. Milt Hinton dubs in the bass solos for Cleavon Little, who plays a professional jazz artist living with truths the white amateurs must learn for themselves.

*Kansas City* (1996. Directed by Robert Altman). Robert Altman's tribute to the music he heard growing up in Kansas City in the 1930s. Unlike virtually every other jazz film (*Round Midnight* is another major exception), the musicians are filmed playing in real time. There was no after-

dubbing or pantomiming to pre-recorded sound. The tenor battle between Josh Redman as Lester Young and Craig Handy as Coleman Hawkins is not only musically exciting; it's also beautifully acted. The film is distinguished by many subtle touches, such as a historically accurate portrait of Charlie Parker's mother and several moments when the musicians seem to comment on the shenanigans of the film's characters.

*The King of Jazz* (1930. Directed by John Murray Anderson). A startling response to the question, "What is jazz?" According to Paul Whiteman, who appears in several segments of this vaudeville collection of skits, songs, and production numbers, jazz was born in Europe and is played exclusively by white people. Precisely two African Americans appear on screen. One is a bizarrely sexualized little girl sitting on the lap of Whiteman. The other is a scantily clad man reduced to the size of a puppet by the huge drum on which he dances. The miniaturized black man's dance is simply a prelude to a performance of "Rhapsody in Blue," with George Gershwin at the piano.

*A Man Called Adam* (1966. Directed by Leo Penn). Sammy Davis, Jr.'s own production company was behind this "socially conscious" drama about a self-destructive jazz trumpeter loosely based on Miles Davis and played by Sammy Davis, Jr. himself. In an uncanny bit of casting, Cicely Tyson appears as the beleaguered girlfriend of the trumpeter/hero several years before she married Miles. Still a few years before blaxploitation films began presenting powerful black men triumphing over white antagonists, Davis's jazz artist is destroyed by a philistine entertainment industry, racist audiences, and his own tragic mistakes. Nat Adderley was an odd choice to dub in the trumpet solos, but the background music by Benny Carter is a delight.

*The Man With a Golden Arm* (1955. Directed by Otto Preminger). A memorable, jazz-inflected score by Elmer Bernstein plays in the background while Frank Sinatra embodies another myth of the jazz life. As Frankie Machine, Sinatra is a jazz drummer, a junkie, and a dealer in a poker game. As was often the case in Sinatra's early acting career, Frankie succeeds at none of it.

*New Orleans* (1947. Directed by Arthur Lubin). What began as a narrative history of jazz to be directed by Orson Welles ended up as the romance between a white gambler and an opera singer who dabbles in jazz. Arturo DeCordova and Dorothy Patrick are wildly forgettable as the lead characters. The original idea was to build the film around Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong, but their parts became progressively smaller with each rewrite. Holiday ended up playing the white singer's maid ("But she's a cute maid," Billie would tell her friends), while Armstrong supposedly plays himself. Toward the end, Woody Herman pops up along with a symphony orchestra backing Dorothy Patrick's horrifying performance of "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" When Armstrong and Holiday perform "The Blues Are Brewing," however, all is forgiven.

*Paris Blues* (1961. Directed by Martin Ritt). This film would be memorable if only because Louis Armstrong plays an elder statesman, respected by younger musicians and even by a character based on Nadia Boulanger. But the film also has a beautiful score credited to Duke Ellington and mostly composed by Billy Strayhorn. Director Ritt filmed several long, wordless interludes with gorgeous footage of Paris ornamenting the sounds of an augmented Ellington

orchestra. Ellington gave up traveling with his band for the longest time in his career, and Strayhorn worked with the musicians even before Duke arrived in Paris. Ellington was eager to participate in a film that was supposed to feature an interracial romance between Paul Newman and Diahann Carroll. The filmmakers, however, lost their nerve and color-coded the lovers by more conventional standards. Perhaps as a result, the film ends with a rousing, Ellingtonian train theme overwhelming the music of the white lovers.

*Reveille With Beverly* (1942. Directed by Charles Barton). Ann Miller is Beverly, a disc jockey playing music for servicemen about to ship off to war. Whenever she puts the tone arm on a record, the film cuts to actual footage of the performers. Although at this time films of this genre were never allowed to have more than one set of black performers, the real-life Beverly (Jean Hay) was an advisor to the filmmakers and insisted on a much more racially balanced line-up. Along with a very young Frank Sinatra and a nice performance of "Cow Cow Boogie" by Freddie Slack and Ella Mae Morse, the film features beautifully staged scenes with the Ellington and Basie bands as well as two performances by the Mills Brothers.

*'Round Midnight* (1986. Directed by Bertrand Tavernier). Sadly, Dexter Gordon was past his prime when this dreary but well-intentioned film was made. Gordon plays a figure based on both Bud Powell and Lester Young at the end of their careers. The plot is a rescue fantasy inspired by Francis Paudras' friendship with Powell when he was in Paris. Nevertheless, there are several scenes of musicians playing in real time. Herbie Hancock, Bobby Hutcherson, Billy Higgins, Wayne Shorter, Cedar Walton, Freddie Hubbard, and Tony Williams all appear on camera.

*Sweet Smell of Success* (1957. Directed by Alexander MacKendrick). This film is an unrelentingly negative portrait of American culture at the same time that it offers one of the most flattering portraits ever of a jazz musician. Even people who don't care about jazz ought to admire this one. Tony Curtis plays Sidney Falco, an unscrupulous press agent desperate to win status by cozying up to J.J. Hunsecker, an egomaniacal gossip columnist based on Walter Winchell and played by Burt Lancaster. Hunsecker sends Falco to destroy the relationship between his cherished sister and a jazz guitarist played by Martin Milner. Amazingly, the jazz guitarist is the only character in the entire film with any honor and integrity. Jim Hall dubbed in his guitar solos, but Chico Hamilton, Fred Katz, Paul Horn, Carson Smith, Curtis Counce, Frank Rosolino, Conte Candoli, and Buddy Clark all play on screen at one time or another.

*Young Man With a Horn* (1950. Directed by Michael Curtiz). In spite of the tacked-on happy ending, this may be the purest example of the narrative of a jazz musician destroyed by a world that has no use for his art. Loosely based on Dorothy Baker's novel that was loosely based on the life of Bix Beiderbecke, the film casts its trumpeter hero (Kirk Douglas) as a complete naïf, devoted only to his horn. His downfall begins when he is seduced and ultimately abandoned by a wannabe psychoanalyst (Lauren Bacall), who may even be a lesbian. In a scene that appears in at least two other films (*The Five Pennies* and *Mo Better Blues*), the hero's sexual impotence is directly related to his inability to a high note.

## **2. Documentaries, Television Programs, and Videos.**

*Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker* (1987). Gary Giddins wrote and directed this thoughtful documentary that attempts to reverse the idea that Bird was basically a junkie and a failure.

*Charles Mingus: Triumph of the Underdog* (1998). Excellent account of Mingus's career with superb performance footage.

*Duke Ellington 1929-1943* (1991). Several short films featuring Ellington and his orchestra, all of them revealing the extent to which Duke was regarded as a serious artist long before any other black musician won that distinction.

*A Great Day in Harlem* (1997). Perhaps the best jazz film ever made. Many of the artists in the famous photograph of jazz artists taken in front of a Harlem brownstone in 1958 tell their own stories directly to director Jean Bach.

*Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (1991). Based on the superb biography of Robert G. O'Meally, the film collects the best existing footage of the singer and presents her life without sensationalization.

*Let's Get Lost* (1988). Chet Baker tries to perform a con job on director Bruce Weber. As fine a portrait of a sociopath as you're ever likely to see.

*The Miles Davis Story* (2002). Great collection of interviews with Miles and fine performances from his long career.

*Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser* (1988). Charlotte Zwerin weaves together a devastating portrait of the pianist and composer, combining her own interviews with footage of Monk on tour in the 1960s.

*Satchmo* (1989). Gary Giddins gets another credit, this time for his rehabilitation of Louis Armstrong. At a time when most people still thought of Armstrong as an Uncle Tom or simply as a grinning clown, Giddins persuasively argued that he was something much more grand.

*Sound of Jazz* (1957) Television's finest moment. One amazing performance after another by Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Thelonious Monk, Henry Red Allen, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Roy Eldridge, Jimmy Rushing, and many more.

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