

## SAVING IT TWICE:

### *Preserving jazz in documentaries, compilation films, and short subjects*

by

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Some of the best jazz artists were never filmed under the circumstances they themselves might have chosen. More often than not they were presented as grotesques and exotics. When we think of Cab Calloway wildly waving his arms and his hair, or of Fats Waller vigorously exercising his eyebrows and lips, we are recalling the creations of filmmakers for whom such antics made for compelling entertainment. Nevertheless, jazz enthusiasts should be grateful for *any* film of jazz musicians, if only because so little of it exists. Much can be learned from those bits of film that preserve the images of the artists along with their music. Our pleasure in these images can be greatly enhanced when we know where they come from and why there were made.

### **1. Documentaries**

The jazz documentary was born at the same time that the jazz biopic was in its death throes. In the 1950s, when jazz became known as an art music rather than as America's popular music, it began to seem a worthy subject for documentation on film. On the one hand, jazz became an art with a history worth preserving, especially with the new technologies and ideologies that helped make the documentary cinema a thriving art form in the 1950s. On the other hand, jazz had begun to encourage the same "ethnographic" impulses as other exotic phenomena such as the daily habits of eskimos in the Arctic Circle or the love lives of Polynesians on the island of Bora Bora. (One of the fathers of documentary cinema, Robert Flaherty, released *Nanook of the North* in 1922, and collaborated with F.W. Murnau on *Tabu* in 1931.) Not surprisingly, some commentators regard Roger Tilton's *Jazz Dance* (1954) as the first jazz documentary. Although the film included footage of jazz musicians Pee Wee Russell, Jimmy McPartland, and Willie "The Lion" Smith, it was more focused on the strange and enchanting antics of Lindy Hoppers at the Central Plaza Dance Hall in New York City.

Jazz purists, however, are likely to regard television features such as *Satchmo the Great* (1956), *The Sound of Jazz* (1957) and *Theater for a Story* (1959) (later released as *The Sound of Miles Davis*) as the first jazz documentaries. Among theatrically released films, the first jazz documentaries include *Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1960) and the French film *Django Reinhardt* (1958). Important films built around histories of jazz musicians along with footage of their performances would include *Big Ben* (Netherlands, 1967), *Mingus* (1968), *L'Adventure du jazz* (France, 1970), *Til the Butcher Cuts him Down* (1971), *Jazz Is Our Religion* (Britain, 1972), *On the Road with Duke Ellington* (1974), *Always for Pleasure* (1978), *Jazz In Exile* (1978), *Last of the Blue Devils* (1979), *Different Drummer: Elvin Jones* (1979), *Memories of Duke* (1980), *Dizzy Gillespie: A Night in Tunisia* (1980), *Imagine the Sound* (1981), *Ornette: Made in America* (1986), *A Brother With Perfect Timing* (1986), *Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker* (TV, 1987), *Let's Get Lost* (1988), *Satchmo* (TV, 1989), *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (TV, 1991), *A Great Day in Harlem* (1995), and *Charles Mingus: Triumph of the Underdog* (1998). In recent years, there has been an explosion of intelligently produced documentaries about John Coltrane, Gil Evans, Max Roach, Sidney Bechet, DeeDee Bridgewater, Bill Evans, Sarah Vaughan, and many others. Most were originally made for America's Bravo

and PBS networks, as well as for French TV's Sept Arte and Ex Nihilo production companies. In 2006 and 2007, more than a dozen DVDs of performances by canonical artists were released on the Jazz Icon series, all of them originally made for European television and essentially unknown to American jazz enthusiasts.

Filmmakers who create a documentary about jazz face the same challenges as other documentarians: they must spend many hours filming their subjects in both typical and extraordinary situations and then reduce all of it to a revealing and exciting feature-length film. If the subject is dead, the best archival footage must be found, but the same rules apply. Jazz documentarians have an additional problem, especially after jazz musicians began to think of themselves as artists and developed performance styles with little of the flamboyance typical of more popular musics. To keep it interesting, jazz documentarians are more likely to use unusual camera angles, overlapping images, and quick cuts from the musicians to more animated faces in the audience. Consider, for example, *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, Bert Stern's film about the Newport Jazz Festival of 1958. When Stern's camera is not zeroing in tightly to catch expressions on the faces of performers, it is constantly cutting away to motorboats off the coast of Newport, children playing in parks, and mildly unflattering images of fans scratching and squinting in the sun.

One of the artists filmed in *Jazz on a Summer's Day* was Thelonious Monk, a constant source of fascination for documentary filmmakers, in spite of or perhaps because of his opaque exterior. Director Stern did not even try to penetrate beneath the surface, showing Monk for less than thirty seconds while his camera looked elsewhere during a complete performance of "Blue Monk." The directors of *The Sound of Jazz*, the ground-breaking CBS television program that broadcast live performances of essential jazz artists to a national audience, took a different approach to the problem of Monk by placing an appreciative Count Basie at the other end of Monk's piano. Although he never plays a note while Monk is on the screen, Basie was probably there to domesticate the younger pianist, who was often compared to Basie because of their shared tendency to prefer a few well-chosen notes over more prolix improvisations. Basie's presence made Monk less bizarre by placing him near a beloved figure from the early history of jazz.

Even after his death in 1982, Monk was still a puzzle that several filmmakers labored to solve. Matthew Seig's 1991 documentary, *Thelonious Monk: American Composer*, first broadcast on the Bravo cable channel, was keenly focused on placing him within a great tradition, going well beyond an association with Count Basie. Early on, the narrator tells us that Monk was inspired by James P. Johnson, who once lived in the same neighborhood as Monk. Duke Ellington and Coleman Hawkins appear in photos with Monk and are named as key influences. Monk's work at the Five Spot with John Coltrane in 1957 shows his effect on the next generation of great jazzmen just as the earlier masters had inspired him. Toward the end of the program, the documentary introduces the group Sphere, a quartet with two of Monk's former sidemen. The group began its career by recording only tunes by Monk, who died—coincidentally and poignantly—on the group's first day in the recording studio. The torch had been passed.

By contrast, Charlotte Zwerin's 1988 documentary *Straight No Chaser* is much less interested in placing Monk within a vital tradition of jazz masters than in observing his eccentricities. While the Monk of Seig's 1991 film walks with dignity but is only heard speaking for a few moments, Zwerin records many of Monk's stranger utterances and regularly shows him

spinning around in circles for no apparent reason. At best, Zwerin's Monk is a free spirit, too devoted to his music to care about much else. At worst, he is a deeply disturbed individual in dire need of the hospitalization he received on more than one occasion.

In *A Great Day in Harlem* (1995), the documentary about the famous photograph of fifty-seven jazz musicians posing in front of a Harlem brownstone in 1958, director Jean Bach gives us still another Monk. Although the documentary touches on most of the musicians who posed for Art Kane's camera one morning in Harlem, the film devotes a great deal of attention to Monk, portraying him as a trickster figure who could, in the words of saxophonist Johnny Griffin, listen carefully to what the other musicians were saying and then destroy everything they had said with "three or four words." At a climactic moment in *A Great Day in Harlem*, we learn that Monk was late for the photo shoot because he was busy trying on different clothes, eventually choosing a yellow sports jacket in full knowledge that he would stand out in a crowd of people wearing mostly dark colors. To call additional attention to himself in the photo, Monk made sure that he was standing near the two beautiful female pianists, Mary Lou Williams and Marian McPartland.

In their compelling portraits of Thelonious Monk, Jean Bach and Charlotte Zwerin are not especially interested in casting him as one of the great men of jazz. Because documentary cinema has for many years been as marginal as jazz, it has been neglected by many of the more ambitious male filmmakers, leaving a vacuum to be filled by women who are less likely to subscribe to the Great Man Theory of History. Female documentarians may have found it easier to break into a male-dominated industry with low-profile films about relatively obscure artists. Indeed, so many fascinating jazz documentaries have been directed by women that they practically make up a separate genre. A partial list would include *But Then ... She's Betty Carter* (Michelle Parkerson, 1980), *Maxwell Street Blues* (Linda Williams, 1980), *Joe Albany: A Jazz Life* (Carole Langer, 1980), *Bix: Ain't None of Them Play Like Him Yet* (Brigit Berman, 1981), *Toshiko Akiyoshi: Jazz Is My Native Language* (Renee Cho, 1983), *Mary Lou Williams: Music On My Mind* (Joanna Burke, 1983), *Ernie Andrews: Blues for Central Avenue* (Lois Shelton, 1986), *Ornette: Made in America* (Shirley Clarke, 1986), *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* (Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, 1987), *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin' Women* (Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, 1988), *Listen Up: The Lives of Quincy Jones* (Ellen Weissbrod, 1989), as well as the films by Charlotte Zwerin and Jean Bach.

Regardless of their gender, all jazz documentarians give us their own, highly personal vision of an artist's life and work. Even when the subject is not as inscrutable as Monk, documentary filmmakers tell the story that best fits their own notions of what the artist ought to be, even if it requires them to do much judicious editing. Their films carry great authority, however, because audiences are willing to believe that the documentary camera only reveals the truth. Contemplating the striking differences among the various documentary portraits of an artist such as Monk should help us shed some of these naive notions.

## 2. Compilation Films

A hybrid genre that offered a few helpings of jazz in the 1930s and 1940s consisted of films with words such as "Parade," "Broadcast," "Canteen," and "Sensations" in their titles. These films almost always built slight plots around attractive couples, but the stories were regularly interrupted to feature popular entertainers. The Danish film industry deserves credit for making

one of the first of these compilation films, *København, Kalundborg og - ?* (1934), especially because they included some of the best early footage of Louis Armstrong. Filmed in a studio in Sweden in 1933 and re-edited to give the impression that he is performing in front of a live audience, an elegantly dressed Armstrong sings, plays, and even dances in front of the French orchestra with whom he was touring at the time.

Duke Ellington knew how to make the most of his appearance in one of the first of several *Hit Parade* films. Filmed in 1937, the Ellington band performs "I've Got to Be a Rug-Cutter," complete with a vocal trio drawn from the band's instrumentalists (Harry Carney, Rex Stewart, and Hayes Alvis). Putting down their instruments, the three step forward to accompany the band's regular vocalist, Ivie Anderson. Ellington wrote the tune specifically for the movie, surely knowing that his band would be much more visually dynamic with three singers harmonizing along with Anderson, who practically rushes onto the stage to sing about her need to succeed as a dancing hipster. The body of the film involved the careers of two radio singers, one trying to hide her past as an escaped convict. The other musical numbers in the film were performed by Eddie Duchin's orchestra, and groups known as "Pick and Pat," and "Molasses and January." Needless to say, footage of the Ellington orchestra's performance of "I've Got to Be a Rug-Cutter" is easier to find than a complete copy of *Hit Parade*.

The occasional jazz artist turned up alongside comedians, dancers, and classical artists in the films of *The Big Broadcast* cycle (1932, 1937, 1937), but jazz people became a fixture of the genre when it flourished as a morale-builder during the years of World War II. Many stars were willing to make brief appearances in the canteen and parade films knowing that they were entertaining American boys before and after they went in to battle. The plots of many of the films directly involved soldiers and the women they meet at events staged for them. In *Stage Door Canteen* (1943), for example, romance blooms between a soldier and a USO girl while Ethel Waters sings "Quicksand" with Count Basie and Peggy Lee performs "Why Don't You Do Right?" with the Benny Goodman orchestra. Audiences could also see Dorothy Dandridge with Count Basie in *Hit Parade of 1943* (1943), Lena Horne in *Thousands Cheer* (1943), Jimmy Dorsey in *Hollywood Canteen* (1944), and Cab Calloway, Woody Herman, and Dorothy Donegan in *Sensations of 1945* (1944). With the end of the swing era and the high popularity of jazz, compilation films were more likely to feature rock 'n' roll artists in films such as *Rock Around the Clock* (1956), *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), and *Rock, Pretty Baby* (1956). Still, Count Basie would perform alongside rock groups in the compilation film *Jamboree* (1957) and Lionel Hampton would appear in *Mr. Rock and Roll* (1957), a celebration of Alan Freed and the rock groups he presented on his radio program.

In the 1940s, when the canteens and parades were most successful, the films typically allowed only one African American act into the cast. Filmmakers feared that more than one would lead audiences in the South and elsewhere to boycott the film. The films were even shown to certain audiences with scenes of black performers edited out. A major exception to the rule is *Reveille with Beverly* (1943), thanks to the heroic efforts of Jean Hay, a female disc jockey on whom the film's Beverly is based. Along with Count Basie and Duke Ellington, the film features performances by Bob Crosby and his Bobcats, the band of Freddie Slack with Ella Mae Morse, and a young Frank Sinatra in one of his first film appearances. Although Ann Miller plays Beverly as an enthusiastic young woman who only wants to cheer up American boys on Army bases by playing their favorite music in the morning (hence the title), Jean Hay was the music

supervisor for the film and fought to get the music she wanted. She successfully made the argument that the orchestras of *both* Basie and Ellington ought to be in the film, emphasizing the vastly different types of music they played rather than insisting on two acts with people of color. She also insisted that the bands perform their songs unedited, without cutting away to advance the plot as was too often the case in the various compilation films. Thanks to Ms. Hay's efforts, *Reveille with Beverly* contains precious footage of the Basie band playing "One O'Clock Jump" as well as the Ellington band performing "Take the A Train," complete with a vocal by Betty Roche and a few of the dance steps with which the unique trumpeter/violinist/vocalist Ray Nance regularly delighted audiences.

### 3. Short Subjects

The compilation films drew upon a vaudeville tradition that strung together unrelated comedians, dancers, singers, and serious actors in a single evening's entertainment. But because these were Hollywood films, the canteens and parades gave audiences the involving stories and happy endings that were essential to the American cinema's success. The industry retained a bit of its vaudeville heritage by putting short films on the bill along with feature films, even if there was no thematic connection. African American artists were making short sound films with experimental technology even before the industry was revolutionized by Al Jolson's singing in the hugely popular *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first major film with sound. Noble Sissle stood and sang while Eubie Blake played the piano in a short film, *Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake Sing Snappy Songs*, released in 1923. African American subjects were also essential in *After Seben* (1929), with an appearance by Chick Webb and his band, and *Yamekraw* (1930), a tone poem about life in the south with music by James P. Johnson.

Two extraordinary short films from 1929 reveal much about how the film industry conceptualized male and female musicians, especially when they were black. *St. Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan*, both directed by Dudley Murphy, also show that Duke Ellington was already a unique figure among African American performers in the first decade of his career. In her only appearance on film, the blues singer Bessie Smith stars in *St. Louis Blues* as a poor woman totally devoted to a dapper fellow who openly abuses her. At one point, she lies on the floor begging him to come back, even as he takes money from her garter and walks away with another woman. She ends the scene still on the floor, drinking gin and singing the blues. The trope that singers—especially female singers—express their feelings directly through song without intellection completely dominates the film's presentation of Smith's character. At the finale, when she stands at the bar with a stein of beer and sings the title song along with an orchestra and a choir, she is presumably doing nothing more than telling us how she feels about her man and what he has done to her. She just happens to be singing in the forceful and assertive tones we associate with the historical Bessie Smith, who was certainly no one's doormat.

In *Black and Tan*, by contrast, Duke Ellington is a dignified and principled artist. While Bessie Smith does not "play" a blues singer but is entirely contained within the film as a victimized woman, Ellington actually plays himself, a composer and bandleader to whom everyone refers as "Duke." The film begins with Duke at the piano wearing a tie, a vest, and a white shirt, but perhaps because he has immersed himself in the work of composing, he has taken off his coat and loosened his tie. He is clearly meant to resemble a professional man who has

come to work dressed in a suit. And unlike the blues singer, who expresses her feelings "naturally" through song, Duke controls every aspect of his music as he teaches his trumpeter, Artie Whetsol, how to play the opening notes of his new composition, "Black and Tan Fantasy."

Ellington's unique prestige is further in evidence when two illiterate black men arrive to repossess his piano. Played by Edgar Connor and Alec Lovejoy, who also appear in *St. Louis Blues*, the piano movers represent all the minstrel stereotypes that Ellington was already in the process of refuting. *Black and Tan* also features a performance by the beautiful Fredi Washington, who plays a dancer working with Duke's orchestra. Perhaps because she is slim and has fair skin, Washington bears little resemblance to the Bessie Smith of *St. Louis Blues*. Like Duke, she is called by her own name and is in control of her art as a dancer. Later, when Fredi collapses on stage while performing with Duke's band, the man who appears to be running the show orders the musicians to keep on playing even though it's clear that Fredi is seriously ill. At this point, Duke stops his band and walks offstage. No other black actor or musician would be afforded so much dignity in any film, long or short, for a long time to come. Just a few years after he had brought his orchestra from Washington, D.C., to New York, Duke Ellington had established himself as a serious composer and a man of principle. This achievement is all the more remarkable for a man who was black *and* a jazz musician. Thanks to an industry that made a wide range of short, inexpensive films, we have an extraordinary cinematic record of Ellington's early persona.

Louis Armstrong was not presented with as much dignity, at least not in his first American appearances. *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (1932) features the trumpeter in a dream sequence after a hen-pecked black man falls asleep dreaming that he has become "King of Jazzmania" and has ordered Armstrong and his big band to perform for his pleasure. Armstrong appears in a strange leopard-skin tunic. He is up to his knees in soap bubbles, presumably because the dreamer was mopping the floor before he fell asleep. Armstrong sings "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You," and "Shine" with his usual gusto. Unlike the more formally attired Armstrong who would appear the following year in *København, Kalundborg og - ?*, this Armstrong appears content to play the clown. But only when he is singing and gesturing. When Armstrong puts the trumpet to his mouth, we see a musician fully in control of his art, projecting the masculine intensity that would inspire several generations of trumpet-players.

As with so much of early jazz on film, we must look beneath the stereotypical, racist images of black musicians to hear and see what jazz artists could nevertheless accomplish. *Pie, Pie, Blackbird* (1932), for example, features Eubie Blake and his orchestra with vocalist Nina Mae McKinney and the extraordinary dancing of the Nicholas Brothers in a nine-minute short that literally connects the blackness of the performers to the child's rhyme about "Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie." Roy Eldridge appears at the beginning of his career in the band of Elmer Snowden along with a team of athletic tap dancers in *Smash Your Baggage* (1933), a short that casts all the artists as baggage handlers in a railroad station.

Nevertheless, Duke Ellington continued to stand out as the only jazz musician regularly associated with the art of composing. Like *Black and Tan*, *Symphony in Black* (1935) shows Ellington in his studio, composing at the piano. The film even begins with an elaborately engraved invitation for Ellington to write a "new symphony of Negro Moods." Although Ellington later complained that the final film did not contain the image of African American life he was trying to promote, he nevertheless succeeded in presenting himself as a serious artist with

a mission. The stature of Ellington is all the more remarkable in *Symphony in Black*, in which a young Billie Holiday, appearing on film for the first time, plays the same type of abused woman as the Bessie Smith of *St. Louis Blues*, directly expressing her sufferings in song after her lover rejects her.

Perhaps the most ambitious film in the long history of the jazz short is *Jammin' the Blues* (1944). Before he would go on to produce the series of Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts and present jazz artists on his Verve, Clef, and Pablo record labels, Norman Granz worked with the *Life* magazine photographer Gjon Mili to film a group of nattily dressed jazz artists in a carefully staged "jam session." The icon of Lester Young with his pork pie hat and graceful demeanor was permanently inscribed in jazz memory by the opening images of the film: we see two concentric circles in what could be an abstract painting until smoke rises from a cigarette and the circles slowly move up to reveal that it is in fact the top of Young's hat. Eventually the audience sees and hears performances by Harry Edison, Illinois Jacquet, Jo Jones, Barney Kessel, Marlowe Morris, Sidney Catlett, Red Callendar, and John Simmons in a variety of performances, always photographed before a stark cyclorama with no set decorations except an occasional chair. Even when Marie Bryant sings "On the Sunny Side of the Street" and dances the Lindy Hop with Archie Savage, the austere setting for the film provided a striking visual analog for the idea that jazz played by black musicians was a serious art form. The voiceover narration that begins the film even refers to the music as "a midnight symphony."

Very few short films subsequently went as far as *Jammin' the Blues* in presenting jazz as art and in observing musical performances so scrupulously. At the time, the music was seldom taken seriously enough to be given such reverential treatment. And by the time the battle had been won and jazz was widely regarded as art, the victory proved to be a pyrrhic one. Jazz had lost its mass audience and no longer interested filmmakers looking for lucrative subjects to film. Virtually every white swing band had appeared in a short film or a soundie during the 1930s and 1940s, and many of the great black jazz artists could be seen in short subjects prior to a feature film. By the 1950s, however, the feature film itself became the main attraction, especially when filmmakers strove to entice audiences away from their television sets. And if there had been more short subjects in movie theaters in the 1950s, they would have featured rock acts rather than jazz performers. The jazz short had served its purpose, and the television documentary, usually funded with corporate moneys, had become the dominant venue for jazz on film.