

## Book Reviews

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*Bebop, Swing, and Bella Musica: Jazz and the Italian American Experience.*

By Bill Dal Cerro and David Anthony Witter.

Chicago: Bella Music Publishing, 2015.

384 pages.

Anyone familiar with the history of jazz will recognize that Italian Americans occupy a central role, as musicians, composers, promoters, and fans. Among the musicians alone are such figures as Nick LaRocca, the pioneering New Orleans cornetist; Joe Venuti, the swing era's great violin soloist; Louis Prima, bandleader and showman extraordinaire; Lennie Tristano, the bebop pianist and pedagogue; Chick Corea, the giant of jazz fusion; and many more. It is somewhat scandalous that for many decades there has been no book about Italian Americans in jazz history.

Bill Dal Cerro and David Anthony Witter have stepped into this void with an effervescent, vividly written, and nearly encyclopedic popular history, appropriately titled *Bebop, Swing, and Bella Musica*. This title points to one of the key arguments that winds through the book: that, from jazz's beginnings, Italian musical traditions—rich in melody and virtuosity—mixed with blues, ragtime, and improvisation to give jazz a Mediterranean quality. The authors occasionally acknowledge that other European and Latin American musical traditions also shaped jazz, but for the sake of clarity and emphasis, they highlight the dramatic and contrasting admixture of African American and Italian American musical styles in Dixieland, swing, bebop, and fusion.

This highlighting leads in turn to a recurring focus on race relations, emphasizing the numerous episodes of cultural cross-fertilization and social harmony that have characterized encounters between African Americans and Italian Americans throughout the history of jazz. The result is a celebratory and benign portrait of generations of Italian American vocalists, instrumentalists, composers, and arrangers, making music and contributing to social and racial tolerance. This point is stressed by the authors in order to dispel what they perceive to be dominant and pernicious stereotypes in popular culture of Italian Americans as racists and as *mafiosi*—sinister figures who were more likely to exploit and harm African Americans than make music with them.

These arguments are woven subtly, for the most part, into a wide-ranging biographical survey of Italian American jazz musicians. Most of the thirty-five chapters are short biographies of prominent singers and instrumentalists. In the latter part of the book, the authors provide interviews with individuals born in the 1920s and after; these chapters read less like history and more

like celebrity profiles. Also included is a one-hundred-page appendix of short biographical entries on hundreds of lesser-known figures. Dal Cerro and Witter have done considerable research, and their survey is largely accurate down to the smallest details. (It is thus surprising to discover occasional typos, such as the repeated misspelling of Richard Rodgers's name.) Overall, the emphasis on biography tends to obscure the main arguments of the book, outlined above. However, because the authors manage to maintain a consistent enough tone and focus, the book is far less fragmented and chaotic than other biographical digests of jazz tend to be. The writers' passion for *bella musica*, racial tolerance, open-minded musical fraternity, and the informal creativity that has often characterized jazz make this a coherent and engaging book.

As a popular work, the book does not lay out its thesis systematically. Individuals, not ideas, step into the foreground, and scholarly analysis is not the priority. Despite the subtle continuity of the book's argument, the transitions from one musician to the next also tend to fragment the chronology. It might have been helpful, for example, to summarize the social and racial attitudes of Italian American musicians in early New Orleans jazz to provide a fuller understanding of the career of Nick LaRocca. His well-known turn late in life toward antiblack attitudes, generated in large part by his feeling that his contributions to jazz as leader of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band had been neglected, might also have been seen as an example of the move of the larger New Orleans Italian American community away from their previous proximity to African Americans. White jazz musicians in general tended to be more racially tolerant than their nonmusical brothers and sisters, so it might be overoptimistic to characterize an entire ethnic group as having shared the progressive views of certain musicians, such as Louis Prima, a close ally of Louis Armstrong, or Tony Bennett, a lifelong champion of civil rights. As Italian Americans rose in stature in U.S. society and entered the professions, the middle class, and the suburbs, they "became white" in the manner of some other European ethnic groups—a process that tended to distance and alienate them from nonwhite groups remaining in inner cities. Since Dal Cerro and Witter wisely explore race relations in their volume, it is unfortunate that they do not incorporate into their survey at least basic findings about trends in ethnic difference and inequality.

It is inevitable, perhaps, that a book as rich and detailed as this would inspire quibbles with some choices and conclusions. A few major, or at least very interesting, figures are not given much biographical treatment. These include the big-band musician brothers Adrian and Arthur Rollini (the latter of whom wrote an autobiography); veteran swing players such as bandleader and multi-instrumentalist Vido Musso and saxophonist Toots Mondello; the composer Johnny Carisi; the clarinetist Jimmy Giuffre; and key contemporary figures

such as pianist and composer Chick Corea. They are here, but mentioned only in passing, while the interview subjects get much more prominent treatment. This is a common pitfall of the biographical compendium: A subject one is able to spend time with takes precedence over one outside the room. Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett each get a chapter, and while the authors are careful to defend the two star singers' jazz bona fides, profiling them in a book such as this inevitably puts career practitioners of jazz, deserving of attention, in the shadows.

It is unfortunate that the authors do not provide footnotes, instead offering a small number of page citations within the text, along with a bibliography. The bibliography is wide ranging but contains gaps, especially in jazz biography and autobiography. As happens in some other jazz histories, the collecting of a few prominent female Italian American musicians into a single chapter hardly does service to the central issues of gender identities and relationships in jazz. And while a closing chapter on jazz music in Italy—which begins jarringly by focusing on Benito Mussolini's piano-playing son, Romano—is interesting, the authors have neither prepared us for it nor suggested how recent trends in Italy illuminate the Italian American experience in jazz.

These false steps, though, do not detract from the rich and rewarding content of this pioneering volume, which undeniably succeeds in depicting a tradition of passionate music making in the context of a vibrant culture. In the twentieth century this culture made a complete transition from the shores of New Orleans and Manhattan to Middle America, from the margins to the mainstream of U.S. society. The testimony of the musicians is intimate and always engaging, and—most important for a book of this kind—it makes the reader want to reach for CDs or audio streaming and listen to their music. Especially in this regard, Dal Cerro and Witter have made a very worthwhile contribution to jazz history and to Italian American studies.

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*City of Neighborhoods: Memory, Folklore, and Ethnic Place in Boston.*

By Anthony Bak Buccitelli.

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016.

240 pages.

This book is a welcome addition to the recent scholarly study of Boston's neighborhoods, such as Dan Monti's *Engaging Strangers* (2013) and Sylvie Tissot's