

Being Home: Jazz Authority and the Politics of Place*

By Vijay Iyer

Horace Tapscott. *Songs of the Unsung: The Musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott*. Edited by Steven Isoardi. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001. xvi, 254 pp.

Bill Kirchner, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xii, 852 pp.

Songs of the Unsung: The Musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott sets forth an astonishing, searingly honest view of one segment of music history that is indeed unsung. Tapscott (1934–1999) was a pianist, composer, bandleader, and social activist who spent most of his life in the African American communities of Los Angeles. In 1998, sociologist Steven Isoardi collaborated with several generations of Los Angeles jazz musicians to compile a vital oral history of that city's rich, undervalued role in African American music and culture (Bryant et al. 1998). Among Isoardi's interview subjects was Tapscott, who also served as a co-editor of the compilation. Several hours of conversation with Tapscott were distilled into a handful of pages for his entry in that volume. Subsequent to Tapscott's death, Isoardi arranged these transcribed recollections into a coherent, compelling autobiography. The resultant memoir reminds us with stunning candor that too much has happened under the radar of the jazz industry.

The narrative begins by relating the powerful sense of belonging and purpose that Tapscott experienced as a child in segregated, Depression-era Houston. Tapscott connects this sense to formal and informal cultural institutions such as the church, the familial cohesiveness of his neighborhood, and most of all, the omnipresence of music. "You've got to have the music all the time; it was part of the fabric of the community" (10). As a child, he learned elements of music from his mother and moved with his family to southern California in 1943, shortly after beginning the trombone. Exposed as a teenager to L.A.'s busy Central Avenue jazz scene, Tapscott found himself learning from Melba Liston, Gerald Wilson, Buddy Collette, Wardell Gray, and many other mentor figures. He counted Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Frank Morgan, and Eric Dolphy among his young peers. While in high school, he had extensive private music lessons and began performing around town. Later, he had a brief stint at Los Angeles City College: "That was a big thing for black folks in the 1940s and 1950s. It didn't matter what college, just as long as you went

Current Musicology, nos. 71–73 (Spring 2001–Spring 2002)

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to college. . . . You'd get free bread at the store. 'This boy is going to college. And a male, at that!' " (39). Possessing advanced abilities in music theory, harmony, sight reading, and ear training, he soon grew frustrated with the continual condescension he experienced dealing with white professors and students, and returned to "the U of S, University of the Streets, on Central Avenue" (41).

The period that followed saw the decline of the Central Avenue scene, the dissolution of the local African American chapter of the musicians' union (subsumed under the white-run chapter in the name of integration), and the proliferation of narcotics. Tapscott joined the Air Force to be in the band and was stationed in Wyoming, where his natural leadership skills and confrontational nature both became crucial to his survival. In 1958, out of the service, he joined Lionel Hampton's band as a trombonist and occasional pianist, traveling around the country on a grueling schedule for decent pay. Then one night, he had an important change of heart, related in typically hair-raising fashion.

With [Lionel] Hamp[ton], we played mostly in the South and New York. Those were two racist places and still are. I thought, "Well, there's no point. What's the point of playing this music here? These people don't pay any attention to it and don't have any idea what we're playing." And the band was playing great music . . . but I wasn't satisfied . . . because I didn't feel the music was making any point.

Then the band came to Los Angeles for a gig out on Sunset Boulevard. I'll never forget. After the last performance, we were getting ready to head back to New York. At four o'clock that morning, I got off the bus. Oliver Jackson, the drummer, said, "Where you going, Horace?"

"This is it, brother. I've had it."

I wanted to do something else. I wanted my own thing; I wanted to write it and I wanted to help preserve the music. The music was just going off, and nobody knew who wrote the music or cared. . . . And that's why my feelings got to the point where these people, these men and women who really were in the music . . . should be recognized and their contribution to this whole scheme of things should be recognized.

This is when I first started thinking about putting the Arkestra together and that's why I got off the road to start my band, to preserve black music. I wanted to preserve and teach and show and perform the music of black Americans and Pan-African music, to preserve it by playing it and writing it and taking it to the community. That was what it was about, being part of the community, and that's the

reason I left Hamp's band that night. I decided that what my family had gone through for me to get into the music was for this particular reason, to make a point, to say something with it, for it to be accepted as good music and to be accepted as part of the fabric of the whole society that we all dream of having. And that meant being home. (79–80)

The rest of the book depicts the subsequent four decades as a realization of this dream. Back home in his community in L.A., he brought together a group of musicians that became known as the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra (nicknamed the “Ark,” with biblical connotations intact). Together they began working on music constantly, organizing their own concerts, providing educational programs, and presenting music as a social occasion and a focal point for community activities. “[W]e said, ‘Why don’t we pull this together and put on functions and show how we feel, where we’ve been, where we are, and where we want to go’ ” (107). Tapscott became a nurturer of young talent, creating a space for them to develop and committing to them as if they were family. Though remarkably extensive, the Arkestra’s activities went largely undocumented by the mainstream media: “All this was going on in the community, but no newspaper, no news, no writers” (107). His fixation on grass-roots activities took priority over more traditional dealings with the jazz industry:

“So why don’t you stop all this business, man, and go to New York and make a record?”

I had forgotten all about that; it had left my mind. I had no idea what was happening in that world. Records and all that, I didn’t even think about it. (121)

Over the years his organization, UGMA (the Underground Musicians’ Association) transformed into UGMAA (the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension), a major grass-roots institution with an international reputation. Tapscott was not just a pianist-composer-bandleader but also an educator and healer, an agent for social change, whose musical activism ultimately functioned as a guiding light in his stricken community.¹

Burton Peretti observes that in jazz musicians’ oral histories, the discourse that unfolds reveals the speakers’ “notions of power, will, beauty, and politics, and stimulate[s] readers to confront their own ideology” (1995:130). But in the course of his oral history, Tapscott does more: he challenges the reader with his *agency*. What may appear at the outset to be a straightforward narration of his life experiences becomes, in retrospect, the tracing of a *path of action*—a sketch of a revolutionary trajectory. The book goes beyond jazz autobiography as a commodity, transcending the anecdotal setting, in the same way that Tapscott’s actions extend be-

yond LP records, beyond jazz, beyond music. Circumventing the conventions of the jazz industry, Tapscott's path of action breaks the cycle of commodification and erupts into the reader's own reality. The reader becomes intensely, even painfully conscious of a continual *process* of struggle and activism, radically integrated into everyday life. With monumental conviction, Tapscott articulates his commitment to *place*, in the sense suggested by George Lipsitz (1994) and others: a global awareness wedded to a specific cultural rootedness that is radically local. Tapscott speaks and acts from the vantage point of a *socioculturally situated* musician. His understandings of what music is about and what it is for are traced directly to his early immersion in a living community that operated under the same principles—and these were principles he could not leave behind. Building an institution on these tenets is something he describes as an unavoidable path. The inextricably rooted functionality of Tapscott's work “answers back” to the forces of globalization by insisting on the primacy of the local and the particular, the importance of being home.

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Released in time for the holiday season in 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* (hereafter *OCJ*) endeavors to be viewed as “the one indispensable publication in the field,” to quote a highlighted phrase in the back-of-the-jacket testimonial by seasoned producer George Avakian. Editor Bill Kirchner commissioned sixty brief thematic chapters by fifty-nine different contributors, including journalists, critics, scholars, and musicians. Many of the chapters take the form of mini-histories, covering important individual figures of jazz, single canonical stylistic eras by decade and genre, notable musicians by instrument, or specific jazz histories by region.

To begin a critical reading of this book, we first need a sense of what it means to be an Oxford Companion to *anything*. In addition to this volume, there are Oxford Companions to English Literature, Philosophy, Wine, the Earth, Crime & Mystery Writing, the Bible, Food, United States History, American Literature, Fairy Tales, Classical Civilization, the Year, Irish History, the Theatre, Canadian Literature, the English Language, Twentieth-Century Literature in English, Aboriginal Art and Culture, German Literature, Western Art, and a great many others. This astonishing list raises a question: is *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* more like *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, or rather similar to *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English*? That is to say, is this a book by and for collectors and enthusiasts, or for scholars and students? “Highly recommended for everyone interested in jazz” (according to saxophonist Benny Carter, on the book jacket), the *OCJ* appears, from a cursory leaf-through, to be aimed precisely at the novice customer, the adrift American consumer logging on to Amazon. A typical entry contains dozens of

brief mentions of relevant musicians and recordings, ranging from the celebrated to the obscure; these allusions are apparently meant to function as pointers for the interested reader to chase down elsewhere, perhaps in a record store or Google search. Indeed, the whole effort could be viewed as an attempt to boost sagging jazz record sales.

After a closer reading, however, one cannot help but see this giant volume above all as a deeply ideological effort, disguised in the rhetoric of neutrality. Kirchner's introduction belies, if not misrepresents, the ultimate message of the book. He writes:

Throughout the—roughly speaking—century-old history of jazz, there have been numerous attempts to “define” what the music is or isn’t. None of these has ever proven successful or widely accepted, and invariably they tell us much more about the tastes, prejudices, and limitations of the formulators than they do about the music. *You’ll find no such attempts here.* (5; emphasis added)

But like Ken Burns, Kirchner (along with the Oxford machine behind him) makes implicit pretensions of completeness, suggesting (in its publicity, as well as its girth and other tacit parameters) that its pages are as thorough as they need to be. Indeed, “you’ll find no such attempts” on any one page, because the whole book is precisely such an attempt. Plentiful cues as to the “tastes, prejudices, and limitations of the formulators” are scattered throughout its pages and its jacket.

We need to read a phenomenon like *OCJ* as an entity larger than the book itself, dressed in a cloud of subliminal messages and situational codes. To “define,” to be “definitive,” is to wield the power of information, and despite Kirchner's disclaimer, that is exactly what is at work here. Like a seventeen-plus-hour documentary, this book certainly contains a vast amount of information—enough to overwhelm anyone who is drawn in at any particular point. Such totalism—also apparent in the jazz record industry's recent spate of “complete” and “definitive” box-set reissues—begins to resemble a form of punishment or hypnosis, which fits right in with this volume's sense of authority. Confronted by this tome, the intended reader, presumably a novice jazz consumer, surely experiences a sublime awe—reminiscent of the novice's sense of helplessness in the jazz section of the local record store, and equally reminiscent of the “sado-masochistic experience” in classical music spectatorship described by Edward Said (1991:3). This consumer (who must spend \$50 on the hard-cover volume) is never empowered to differ with the “authoritative” sweep of a large number of “experts.”

Consider a passage like this one, from Don Heckman's earnest, humorously brief entry on “The Saxophone in Jazz”:

The most visible saxophonists of the [nineties]—Branford Marsalis, Joshua Redman, Steve Coleman, Greg Osby, Joe Lovano, James Carter—all performed at a superior level of competence, drawing inspiration from Hawkins, Young, Parker, Rollins, and Coltrane in varying composites. Yet none, as yet, has disclosed the urgent drive, the passionate spark of originality, that has been at the heart of all the great creative jazz saxophonists. (611)

Such question-begging seals this music off from further study or analysis, revealing a discourse of jazz criticism that is guided by forces of nostalgia, desire, and ultimately power. Who decides what constitutes the “great,” or indeed what lies “at the heart of all” noble practitioners? The *OCJ* hardly addresses such concerns. Instead, a typical chapter serves as a sort of index to a certain style, decade, or instrument. It begins with loving attention to some specific period, passes through a litany of hallowed or obscure seminal musical figures, and ends with a comical explosion of names of more recent vintage.

Who speaks for these artists and why? With the preponderance of jazz autobiography (Tapscott 2001; Davis 1989), interviews (Taylor 1993), and available writings by living musicians (e.g., Braxton 1985; Bryant et al. 1998; Coleman 1999; Lateef 1985–88; Zorn 2000), there was ample opportunity for musicians to trade choruses with the *OCJ*’s authors. But perhaps such a gesture would have undermined the latter group’s claims to authority. The jacket copy notes that the articles were “specially commissioned from today’s top jazz musicians, scholars, and critics.” Indeed, Kirchner boasts of his success in recruiting so many musicians—“fully half” of the fifty-nine contributors—calling it “a definite coup” (6). Kirchner counts among his musician recruits Bill Crow, Dick Katz, Max Morath, Randy Sandke, Bob Belden, and himself. However, there are no names like Sonny Rollins, Max Roach, Cecil Taylor, Randy Weston, Abbey Lincoln, or Wayne Shorter. It is not our place to guess why not, but it surely could not have been because of lack of access (Kirchner works and teaches in New York City) or resources (Oxford can surely afford them).

Issues of inclusiveness arise in other ways as well. To my eyes, despite its lip service to jazz’s diverse profile and its roots in African American culture, this book’s roster of contributors is jarringly, overwhelmingly white. I do not by any means wish to suggest that white authors writing on jazz always advance some kind of “white agenda,” but rather to confess to my own vigilance in this regard. It is worth noting here that the book’s contributors include one who has famously distinguished himself elsewhere as an apologist for Al Jolson’s blackface minstrelsy (Gioia 2000; see Tate 2000 for a critical response), and another who believes that African American innovation in jazz has been increasingly overrepresented

(Sudhalter 1999). In fact, the latter author helped Kirchner select the contributors (x). So, despite the editor's introductory message of inclusion, balance, and celebration, my own critical biases led me to subject this book to a certain kind of scrutiny.

Perhaps to stave off such criticisms, Kirchner follows his introduction with Samuel Floyd's digest version of his own body of work on African aesthetics and stylistic dispositions in African American musics (see, for example, Floyd 1995). However, this chapter becomes a straw man for what follows, a sermon on the European roots of jazz by William Youngren. Youngren's emphasis on the presence of tonality in jazz purports to prove "its status as a member of the large family of tonally based European musics" (28). Ignoring Kirchner's opening quotation of Bill Evans that "Jazz is not a 'what,' it's a 'how'" (3), Youngren proceeds to dismiss notions of African-derived aesthetic or structural elements in jazz, suggesting instead that jazz's origins lie purely in the "what" of tonal music. Stating that "*genuine* survivals from African music are more likely to have been preserved in Latin America" (24; emphasis added), he implies an adherence to the *tabula rasa* theory of African American culture. This point of view has been challenged convincingly and repeatedly by anthropologists from Melville Herskovits (1947) to Robert Farris Thompson (1983), and by music scholars such as Olly Wilson (1974), Christopher Small (1987), and Gerhard Kubik (1999), among many others. But instead of acknowledging this vast body of work, Youngren focuses on the supposedly influential roles of Klezmer, opera, and the French and German composers of the early twentieth century, employing anecdotal evidence and quotes pulled out of context from Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, and Jelly Roll Morton. Given Floyd's ongoing efforts to build a case for an understanding of jazz as primarily an African diasporic music, it is difficult not to see him as the victim of a set-up. In his introduction, Kirchner essentially confesses this opening gambit. "That isn't to say that our contributors always agree," he parries. "For example, you need examine only the first two essays to discover that two eminent scholars . . . have often differing viewpoints on the roots of the music. For me, such differences are part of the stimulation of this book" (5–6). But this *particular* difference cannot be treated as one of many "such differences." For the difference in question is in fact the most ideologically charged debate in all of jazz studies—the ways in which race, ethnicity, and culture contribute to the structure and content of American music. Not just one of many differences, this is *the* difference; it is Difference itself. I was deeply dissatisfied with the throwaway fashion in which this issue is relegated to these two chapters, even if they do open the volume; it feels as though Kirchner fails to contend adequately with the sensitive status of race in the authoring of jazz history.

In any case, with its overreliance on contributions from critics and journalists, this volume neglects the work of many committed contemporary scholars of jazz, such as Ingrid Monson (1996), Ajay Heble (2000), Jon Panish (1997), Eric Porter (2002), Sherrie Tucker (2000), Robin Kelley (forthcoming), and Farah Griffin (2001). Those few scholars who have been included, however, have produced good work here, suggesting that a more judicious balance might have been struck concerning the range of backgrounds of the contributors. Mark Tucker (1991), Lewis Porter (1998), and Scott DeVaux (1997) ably reduce their book-length studies of Ellington, Coltrane, and "bebop," respectively. Gerald Early's event-toned survey of literature with ties to jazz provides a trenchant reading of the mythically American, patently racialized white desire for black authenticity in influential works such as Dorothy Baker's *Man with the Horn*, contrasting it with the more complex renderings in James Baldwin's pivotal story "Sonny's Blues." Early makes passing mention of a moment in *The Great Gatsby* in which one "Vladimir Tostoff" and his bombastic Paul Whitemanesque orchestra perform "A Jazz History of the World"—which could be read as a subtle jab at the *OCJ* itself.

In a chapter on jazz criticism, Ron Welburn notes that "White writers have dominated jazz critical journalism" (749). He gives an etiology of this peculiar prose genre, noting its origins among collegiate white record collectors and hobbyists who lavished attention on the symphonic jazz of the 1920s, "missing altogether the performances of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Jelly Roll Morton, and Duke Ellington" (748). In a historical treatment that dwells mostly on the first few decades of jazz reporting, Welburn's contribution nonetheless sheds indirect light on the current, politically charged landscape of music journalism. Discussing jazz education, Charles Beale addresses (however briefly) common concerns of content emphasis, overall purpose, marginalized ethnicities, and the ever-increasing disconnect between jazz education and contemporary musical styles. However, he stops short of a severe analysis of today's climate, especially in economic terms. For example, he fails to address the problem faced by a surplus of college-educated jazz journeymen with few employment opportunities.

Having the artistic interests that I do, I expressly sought out the portrayals of progressive and recent music in this book. Lawrence Kart's history of the avant-garde from 1949–1967 employs a useful application of Renato Poggioli's framework (1968). But then Kart ascribes undue importance to composers such as George Handy and Bob Graettinger, whom he describes, along with Charles Mingus and George Russell, as "perhaps even more significant to the development of the nascent avant-garde" (449) than Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker. To be sure, the former artists

used modernist techniques for innovative large-group jazz orchestration and formal innovation, but ultimately the avant-garde became best known for creative approaches to small-group improvisation, more influenced conceptually by Monk and Parker. We can ascribe this in part to the kind of resources that were available to artists like Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Roscoe Mitchell (who all get significant space in Kart's discussion). These artists' opportunities came—when they came at all—mostly in the form of club gigs for small groups. Orchestration matters took on a very different nature in these contexts. The main exceptions grew out of and functioned in African American urban communities, such as the AACM's Experimental Band and Horace Tapscott, Sun Ra, and their respective Arkestras (of whom Kart mentions only the last). These were situational concerns, having at least as much to do with race and class as with aesthetics and influence. With Kart's emphasis on form, sound, and rhythm, he does not adequately ground his reasoning in social issues of this sort—nor do enough of the book's authors.

Peter Keepnews's entry on jazz since 1968 initially foregrounds the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the World Saxophone Quintet, and acknowledges the rampant jazz-industry conservatism in the "post-Marsalis wave," but mainly addresses mainstream, major-label artists, with passing mentions of Steve Coleman and John Zorn. Keepnews and many other authors speak more about records than they do about other real-world phenomena; their bodies of knowledge seem predicated on their vinyl and CD collections. One of the book's most impressive set pieces is Dan Morgenstern's "Recorded Jazz," a lengthy and encyclopedically detailed prose chronology of major jazz labels and the artists on whom they profited. Overwhelmingly concerned with cataloguing and tracing the lineages of jazz recordings, this book generally leads one to believe that jazz only exists to the extent that people make records.

In fact, an outpouring of recent scholarship has shown us that recordings are barely half the story. As testified in work by Sherrie Tucker (2000), Paul Berliner (1994), George Lipsitz (1994), Ajay Heble (2000), Jed Rasula (1995), and Scott DeVeaux (1997), as well as in Art Taylor's interviews (1993) and in the first-person memoirs and captured observations of Armstrong (1999), Rollins (Nisenson 2000), and especially Horace Tapscott, this music called jazz has existed and thrived in corners of American and global life untouched by the mainstream, fulfilling important functions beyond its status as leisure-time pursuit for the collector. Observations of this kind resonate with my experiences as a musical spectator and participant. Perhaps as something of a jazz "insider" (a performing musician, composer, and recording artist who collaborates with other

performers, improvisors and composers), I can't help but wish that this music were treated as a real-world activity, rather than a subterranean entity enlivened by the fictions of the record industry. But such a view requires the voice of more jazz insiders—artists and other participants with a necessarily critical stance toward the music business and its hero-makers.

This volume could have used a healthy dose of such first-person critique. An organization like Oxford University Press surely could have commissioned Max Roach or Sonny Rollins or Ornette Coleman or Abbey Lincoln to contribute a chapter; at the very least, it could have included musician-to-musician interviews, in the brutally honest style of Taylor (1993). There also could have been an attempt to cut through conventional media-received wisdom about the evolution of "styles." We ought by now to have moved beyond the decade-by-decade litany of stylistic genealogy (blues, swing, bebop, cool, hard bop, avant-garde, and fusion, all dutifully rendered chapter by chapter); in recent years, many have begun to chip away at this master narrative (see especially DeVaux 1991 and Gabbard 1995). We could have benefited from an acknowledgement and critique of the role of history, hindsight, and context in determining what is or is not "great." There could have been more significant gestures toward inclusion of women and minority writers, or of marginal and contested viewpoints. Under their cover of authority, all of these glaring omissions point to the central problem with this book and so many other completist efforts like it. As it conceals its own acts of domination and its internal power imbalances, the *OCJ* has all the hallmarks of ideology. As such, it imagines itself to transcend place, claiming inclusiveness and universality while failing to acknowledge its own, highly contingent specificity.

So why is an academic press issuing a tome like the *OCJ* and hyping it as "the ultimate guide" from "the premier publisher of books on jazz"? Oxford currently has in print nearly seven hundred books on music. Most of these texts are academic in tone and have an intended audience of scholars, but of the few percent of their titles that cover jazz, almost none of them would fit this description; Gunther Schuller's major analytical works (1968, 1989) and Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* (1995) serve as exceptions, though the latter does not focus solely on jazz. These, along with the occasional collections of useful primary sources (Armstrong 1999; Walser 1999), are sorely outnumbered by more standard fare: fact-based chronological biographies (Catalano 2000), collections of articles by jazz critics (Mandel 1999; Giddins 1998; Gioia 1997), and of course, grand surveys like the *OCJ*. One is led to suppose that the sales of these jazz titles, often big sellers aimed at a popular audience, provide support for Oxford's scholarly music publications, which are almost all European in

emphasis. For insightful scholarship on African American music, the track records are better with publishers such as California, Chicago, Mississippi, Wesleyan, and Duke.

I do not intend to draw a sweeping distinction between scholarship and journalism, or to imply that one style of writing carries more value than another. The point here is that for the most part, the *OCJ* gives us jazz journalism as a hegemony of the banal, whereas we *know* that jazz journalism has so often done so much better, in the hands of Frank Kofsky, Amiri Baraka, A. B. Spellman, Valerie Wilmer, John Litweiler, Graham Lock, and many other writers. Certainly some of these people's work is ideologically charged, but unlike too many of the *OCJ* authors, they never pretend otherwise. For an anthologized journalistic survey of jazz to omit such a broad range of contributors, we have to suspect that something problematic is afoot—something akin to a motive, a desire, an anxiety.

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Interlude. On June 16, 2001, I stopped by the Jazz Gallery, a SoHo venue where I perform occasionally, and noticed a stack of copies of the July issue of *Jazziz* magazine. These issues are distributed to some of the clubs in town for free, presumably one of the perks of living in New York. I grabbed a copy and skimmed it on the train on the way home. At a certain point I wondered if I had somehow pulled a Van Winkle, for I found myself reading glowing, positive *reviews* of the JVC Jazz Festival—which, as far as I knew, was to commence the following day.

They were clearly JVC-sponsored puff pieces, advertisements masquerading as journalism—in fact, a disguised festival program with all the verb tenses changed—but they took it rather far. Seamlessly integrated into the magazine's glossy pages and delivered in the past tense by well-known journalists, the articles dutifully and glowingly described the artists' then-forthcoming festival engagements. With no trace of irony, one proclaimed, "There was even more bracingly fresh mainstream jazz" (Mandel 2001) performed by artists like Joshua Redman and Eric Reed at the festival that hadn't yet begun. (What if Redman were to cancel his concert at the last minute, due to a broken finger, contractual disagreement, or missed flight?) A second article described "the four-hour blockbuster concert" at the Beacon Theater that also had yet to transpire (Blumenfeld 2001). Yet another observed, "Matt Wilson, as usual, stripped jazz of any undue seriousness with antics such as his bandstand 'Survivor' spoof" (Mercer 2001).

Blucary-eyed on the late-night train, I considered the metaphor. *These pages betray a dark mix of desire and anxiety, I half-dreamt—for jazz to have already happened, to be finished before it starts, to end, to expire.*

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As it appears in the title *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, the term “jazz” refers evidently to jazz recordings and artists discussed and arranged by era, region, and instrument. Elsewhere, however, it can refer to a collection of musical practices and behaviors (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996); a complex site for celebration and critical inquiry (Heblé 2000); an enduring, multi-disciplinary collection of social and aesthetic phenomena (O’Meally 1998); or part of a much broader continuum of art forms emerging from the African diaspora (Small 1987; Tapscott 2001). The word “jazz” has been viewed as a pejorative, media-created designation to be resented (by Max Roach, in Taylor 1993:109–11) and as a rallying cry for which one must fight to the death (by Wynton Marsalis, in Milkowski 2000:35). If one can say that jazz “is” anything at all today, it is above all an unstable concept, a contested territory, a locus of conflicting discourses. However, in the course of its dutiful nods to jazz globalism, the *OCJ* treats jazz as a unity. Many of the book’s authors conclude their chapters by stating that “jazz” continues to expand and grow and thrive—seemingly unaware that by this process, the definitions and functions of “jazz” bifurcate, often undergoing irrevocable transformations and discontinuities, becoming many musics under one increasingly problematic umbrella. Today, the concept of jazz as a coherent unity persists only because of the jazz culture industry—via survey texts, glossy jazz magazines, and big-ticket jazz festivals. In the carefully-arranged display lines under the title of his JVC-sponsored *Jazziz* article, Mandel eulogizes, “The mainstream may feed on rivulets / from the radical fringe or bog down in commercial fluff, / but unworthy ideas are flushed out / and jazz itself remains unadulterated” (Mandel 2001:68). But if you take an unfiltered look at jazz microcosms around the world, you see how multivalent and multivoiced it is. You understand that “jazz” is used to describe a vast collection of local musics, with a wide range of antecedents and points of reference. You don’t at all get the sense of jazz as a stable or finished concept. You see jazz as *something that happens, that is happening, that will continue to happen*. People *participate* in these jazz microcosms, which unfold in tandem with the world around them.

In his memoir and in his creative work, Horace Tapscott addresses us with the humility of true accomplishment, treating every achievement as a collaborative effort that was deeply situated in, contingent upon, and inextricable from its community setting. On the other hand, the *OCJ* treats jazz predominantly as a series of *de*-situated musical objects, commodified for consumption. Ultimately, as we play these two texts off of one another, Tapscott’s *path of action* subjects the *OCJ*’s veiled ideology to a devastating critique. His profound sense of place handily deconstructs the claims to

authority brandished by Kirchner and company. In the shadow of Tapscott's awesome purpose, the *OCJ* barely supports its own weight.

We need more books like *Songs of the Unsung*, by which we can come to understand creative musicians as agents of change at home, effecting local pockets of activity with universal ramifications. For Tapscott provides us with an unwritten truth behind this radically unfinished music called jazz. Perhaps, quiet as it's kept, this music has always been about these things: modest selves making exalted sounds, small acts that tell tall tales, notes and tones from a song that never ends.

Notes

* I thank George E. Lewis and the journal's anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on this article.

1. In a private communication, one hip-hop artist remarked that Tapscott's self-effacing activities could be read as a gender role reversal. Tapscott assumed what is viewed as a stereotypically maternal nature, staying in one place, providing a symbolic home, and sending his message around the world indirectly through the people he nurtured. On the other hand, Tapscott readily admits to siring a large number of children by different mothers, clearly problematizing any mythic notion of gender-role subversion.

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