

Jazz Of The Beat Generation

"Holy flowers floating in the air, were all these tired faces in the dawn of Jazz America" (*On The Road* p.204)

The Beats and the post-war jazz generation have long been looked upon as apt bedfellows, especially when it comes to looking cool and playing cooler while strung out on some socially unacceptable substance guaranteed to get under the skin of the Eisenhower Generation of 1950s USA. Without too much effort it can be quickly established that the Beat writer most enthused by jazz and most ready to write about it in his creative outpourings was Jack Kerouac. References to jazz are littered through his novels, stories and poetry and he made no attempt to disguise the fact that his Benzedrine-and-liquor fuelled flights of verbal fancy took as their starting point the solo spirals of his favourite jazzmen. Kerouac's book of poetry, *Mexico City Blues*, starts with this note: "I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses; my ideas vary and sometimes roll from chorus to chorus or from halfway through a chorus to halfway into the next."

What comes as something of a surprise, however, is the exact nature of the jazz musicians most revered by Kerouac, for his idols weren't the super-cool contemporaries of the 1950s Beat movement, but the great players of those writers' youths: Lester Young, "that gloomy, saintly goof in whom the history of jazz was wrapped" ¹, Roy Eldridge, "vigorous and virile, blasting the horn for everything it had in waves of power and logic and subtlety" ², Lionel Hampton, who "made a record called "Hey Ba Ba Re Bop" and everybody yelled it and it was when Lionel would ump in the audience and wail his saxophone at everybody with sweat, claps, umping fools in the aisles, the drummer booming and belaboring on his stage as the

whole theatre rocked" ³, Willis Jackson and Louis Armstrong. Most passionately, though, it was Charlie Parker, "Musically as important as Beethoven/Yet not regarded as such at all" ⁴, Dizzy Gillespie, who "comes on in waves of thought, not phrases" ⁵, Thelonious Monk, "the monk and saint of bop" ⁶, and their peers. He also thrilled to singers, from Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan and Billy Eckstine to Billie Holiday, who had "rocks in her head" ⁷, Ella Fitzgerald and Slim Gaillard. Some of his novels have long descriptive passages catching the performances of one of his heroes in a club - Slim Gaillard in Frisco, for example: "great eager crowds of semi-intellectuals sat at his feet and listened to him on the piano, guitar and bongo drums.... He does and says anything that comes into his head...(he) grabs the bongos and plays tremendous rapid Cubana beats and yells crazy things in Spanish, in Arabic, in Peruvian dialect, in Egyptian, in every language he knows, and he knows innumerable languages." ⁸ Then there's Thelonious Monk at the Five Spot in 1957 helping John Coltrane to attain jazz hero status. Kerouac was there, watching and sucking it all in: "The Five Spot is darkly lit, has weird waiters, good music always, sometimes John "Train" Coltrane showers his rough notes from his tenor horn all over the place." ⁹

He was there also when Bebop first emerged, and spent many nights watching its great innovators create music spontaneously on the bandstand like mythical creatures. For Kerouac, of course, they were great mythical creatures equal to those of the Greeks and Romans, for he made all his contemporaries into such wonderful creations: his friends, his girlfriends, his lovers, his literary buddies and mentors and the musicians who did so much to create the atmosphere within which he lived out his best, most intense years of existence. These ran from the mid forties to the close of the 1950s, when his deep vein of creativity was running dangerously close to empty but he still had a little bit left to come in *Desolation Angels* and *Lonesome Traveller*. He is already relaying warning signs of decay and dissolution in

Subterraneans, published in 1958 but written years before that, when his girlfriend Mardou, towards the end of their affair, intones solemnly "I don't like bop, I really don't, it's like junk to me, too many junkies are bop men and I hear the junk in it." ¹⁰

This CD mixes tracks by artists well known to Kerouac. In fact, many of the tracks on this CD were originally bought, borrowed or played on juke-boxes as 78rpm singles or vinyl equivalents by Kerouac himself, for they are specifically identified in his own writings as being performances that were special to him. These include records such as Dizzy Gillespie's 'Salt Peanuts', the Dexter Gordon - Wardell Gray tenor sax duel 'The Hunt' (an in-concert rave-up mentioned by Kerouac in *On The Road*), Billy Eckstine's 'I Only Have Eyes For You', recorded in January 1946 but remembered by Kerouac midway through the next decade when writing one of the happier scenes in *Subterraneans*, and a whole string of Charlie Parker singles, including three in one sentence in *Desolation Angels*: "Meanwhile the Parisian jazz musician was explaining that Charlie Parker wasn't disciplined enough, that jazz needed European classical patterns to give it depth, which sent me upstairs whistling 'Scapple', 'Au Privave' and 'I Get a Kick'." ¹¹

Earlier in *Desolation Angels* Kerouac recalls past times in San Francisco: "I pass old juke joints where I used to go in an play Lester on the box and drink beers and talk with the cats, "Hey! Whatcha doin down here?" "In from New York", pronouncing it New Yahk, "The Apple!" "Precisely the Apple" "Down City" "Down City" "Bebop City" "Bebop City" "Yeah!" - and Lester is playing 'In a Little Spanish Town'..." Similar recall brings another scene floating in front of Kerouac's memory in *Dharma Bums*: "We ran around the beach. At one point Japhy and Psyche were hiking up ahead on the beach and I was walking alone whistling Stan Getz's "Stella" and a couple of beautiful girls up front with their boyfriends heard me and one girl turned and said 'Swing'." Both the Young and Getz tracks are on this record.

Lionel Hampton got two tune-checks, one in *On The Road* describing a wild night in L.A. – “The wild humming night of Central Avenue – the night of Hamp’s ‘Central Avenue Breakdown’ – howled and boomed outside”, the other in his essay *The Beginning of Bop* [re-printed later], where the ‘Hey Ba Ba Re Bop’ story quoted above is related. The fact that Hamp was a vibraphonist/sometime drummer suggests a defect in Kerouac’s memory rather than his enthusiasm, because Hamp’s sax players regularly strode offstage and hooted it up in the audience, sending the crowd into a frenzy, even leading them in a conga line around the theatre while the band roared away onstage. Wild nights indeed.

Other musicians are given vivid portraits throughout Kerouac’s writings, though they relate to live appearances rather than discs. George Shearing, for example, was another huge Kerouac enthusiasm in “his great 1949 days before he became cool and commercial”,¹² as this *On The Road* extract shows: “Suddenly Dean stared into the darkness of a corner beyond the bandstand and said, ‘Sal, God has arrived.’ I looked. George Shearing. And as always he leaned his blind head on his pale hand, all ears opened like the ears of an elephant, listening to the American sounds and mastering them for his own English summer’s-night use. Then they urged him to get up and play. He did. He played innumerable choruses with amazing chords that mounted higher and higher till the sweat splashed all over the piano and everybody listened in awe and fright. They led him off the stand after an hour. He went back to his dark corner, old God Shearing, and the boys said, ‘There ain’t nothin left after that.’”

Other musicians – some included here, like Gerry Mulligan, Lennie Tristano, Cal Tjader and Miles Davis – get awe-struck name-checks but no specifics when it comes to a selection or a night-club appearance, while still others, like Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Willis Jackson, are tied

into specific moments (like the 1951 Duke Ellington Metropolitan Opera concert in *On The Road*’s final pages that was not recorded for commercial release) but were not available for this compilation. Willis Jackson, for example, is the subject of another bout of *On The Road* enthusiasm from Dean: “He leaped out of the chair and put on a Willis Jackson record, ‘Gator Tail’. He stood before it, socking his palms and rocking and pumping his knees to the beat. ‘Whoo! That sumbitch! First time I heard him I thought he’d die the next night, but he’s still alive.’”

In fact Jackson, then a member of the Cootie Williams band and famous overnight due to his wild 1949 solo on Williams’s ‘Gator Tail’ single, lived longer than either Kerouac or his pal, Neal Cassady. Kerouac himself withdrew from the jazz scene by the end of the 50s, preferring his memories to the new sounds that jangled his ears. But this CD is proof positive of the ebullient, adrenaline-laced music that he and his generation of beats, intellectuals and drop-outs lived, loved and passed out to in those intoxicating post-war years when it seemed that messiahs really could emerge from the dark recesses of night clubs and blow everyone away with their messages, and that Young America would be out there, listening to every diamond-hard note.

Keith Shadwick, 2002.

Footnotes

Text quotations taken from the following Jack Kerouac titles:

1. *On The Road*; 2. *On The Road*; 3. *The Beginning of Bop*; 4. *Mexico City Blues*; 5. *Desolation Angels*; 6. *Subterraneans*; 7. *The Beginning of Bop*; 8. *On The Road*;
9. *Lonesome Traveller*; 10. *Subterraneans*; 11. *Desolation Angels*; 12. *On The Road*