

Oscar Peterson: A Musical Biography. By Alex Barris. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2002. 244 pages. Hard cover. ISBN 0-00-200082-2 \$37.95

Alex Barris's *Oscar Peterson: A Musical Biography* is first and foremost a celebration of Peterson and his music. Barris, who has known Peterson for over fifty years, adulates his subject as "Canada's greatest gift to the world of jazz" (vii). But while Barris's cheerleading is at times refreshing, the book is poorly organized and edited, and makes little effort to provide a balanced view of Peterson's musical life and career.

Organized loosely in chronological order, the book attempts to paint a picture of Peterson's musical career by presenting a deluge of anecdotes from a variety of sources including Peterson himself. Although Barris seems to have had several opportunities to interview Peterson directly, he also relies extensively on third-party reflections and other Peterson interviews. In fact, a large part of the text consists of quotations. There are frequent references to record liner notes, newspaper articles, Peterson's Web site (www.oscarpeterson.com), and books such as Gene Lees' *Oscar Peterson: The Will to Swing* (2000) and John Gilmore's *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (1989). But readers who are interested in tracking down Barris's citations and second-hand retelling of stories will be disappointed. There is no exhaustive list of sources either in the form of endnotes or a bibliography. However, Barris does include an index and an extensive, although not complete, discography. (Peterson's recordings from the late 1940's are missing.) He also includes a List of Permissions which lists some

sources, although not in alphabetical order nor always with full citations. (Curiously, Lees' book, while frequently referenced, is absent from this list.)

Barris's book was published in 2002. In the same year, Peterson's autobiography *A Jazz Odyssey: The Life of Oscar Peterson* made its triumphal debut, and the updated version of Lees' invaluable resource appeared only two years before. Comparisons among the books are inevitable; there are considerable similarities in structure and content. A striking difference, though, is what Barris does not include. Whereas Lees delves into Peterson's career and personal life with verve, Barris skips over much discussion of the latter. In a prefatory Author's Note, he explains:

To the extent that that is possible, I believe that anybody's private life is his own business, and not ours. Consequently, references to Oscar's personal life are included in this book only where they have some bearing on his musical or professional activities.
(vii)

In contrast, Peterson's autobiography does include ample discussion of "Matters Personal," devoting an entire section to it, with references to his failed marriages and other problematic relationships. Both Lees and Peterson address the complicated relationship that Oscar had with his severe father, which Barris bypasses to emphasize only the positive dynamics.

Throughout, Barris maintains a genial, colloquial style of writing. This is most successful when Barris recounts his personal association with Peterson. For example, in Chapter 1, "The Joe Lewis of the Piano," Barris shares with pleasure his discovery of Ella Fitzgerald and Peterson jamming in the wings of Massey Hall before an early 1950's concert in Toronto. Similarly, in the chapter entitled "Music and Fun," Barris discusses Peterson's penchant for practical jokes and tells of a good-natured joke he played on Oscar. Some passages go over the top, however, in their gratuitous praise. Consider the following passage in reference to the album entitled *Jousts*:

What a marvelous idea it was for Oscar (and to give him due credit, Norman Granz) to go into studios in Los Angeles, New York, and even London, England, with these trumpet kings and give us all such joyous jazz. (143)

Each of the twenty-eight chapters is loosely guided by a theme, stringing together sometimes disparate stories into a collage of vignettes. For example, in "The Amsterdam Scam," only a small portion directly deals with the issue suggested by the title, namely that the music on the LP called *The Oscar Peterson Trio at the Concertgebouw* actually comes from a performance at the Civic Opera House in Chicago. After a little more than a page on the so-called scam, Barris spends six paragraphs discussing Peterson's singing on records, both involuntary and intentional, after mentioning that Peterson's voice is heard humming along on one track of

the album. After identifying *With Respect to Nat* as Peterson's second (and last) recording where he sings and plays, Barris detours for a further five paragraphs on Nat King Cole's musical career. Barris does bring the topic back to the first digression of Peterson's singing, but only after repeating in two places that Cole died the same year the LP was issued. An abrupt return to the chapter's main topic is heralded with "To get back to the *Concertgebouw* CD...." However, Barris soon wanders away again, quoting from an interview with Herb Ellis (Peterson's guitarist in his first trio) on the trio's musical interaction, given in the liner notes for a CD reissue. After one more brief mention of musical selection inconsistencies, the chapter fizzles out with a review of Peterson's performances on two other tracks.

Inconsistent organization and repetition stemming from atrocious editing plague many sections of the book. On pages 65 and 75, the same extended Ellis quote is used even though the quote in the latter location is only indirectly related to the content. Barris also writes that Peterson was ready to perform a June 2001 concert as if it had yet to occur (p. 221), but earlier in a different chapter, Barris summarizes how the June concert went (p. 215). The chapter on "Oscar the Composer" is particularly bad in this regard. On page 130, Barris writes "[Peterson] has with age become more of an experimentalist, taking greater risks and attempting greater *innovation*," but just five lines later he continues "...[Peterson] resisted strong pressure from those who wanted him to be an *innovator*... He's been doing it for forty years, and he has

prevailed” (*italics added*). It also takes nine paragraphs just to get to the main topic: “Oscar Peterson has done his share of composing, too.” Immediately following this statement though, Barris cites two paragraph-long remembrances of Oscar’s incredible musical memory as a child, before the first substantive discussion of Peterson’s compositional activities occurs.

These meanderings could at times be considered a plus. For instance, Barris’s unexpected interpolation of a four-CD listening guide to Oscar Peterson is, nonetheless, a perfectly valid collection of pivotal recordings. This list (pp. 158-9) includes *Oscar Peterson Beginnings* (1945–49), *The Oscar Peterson Trio at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival* (1956), *Ella and Oscar* (1975), and *Last Call at the Blue Note* (1990). He frequently provides interesting anecdotes about other jazz musicians, and there are extended forays into people prominent in Peterson’s life, including his parents, his sister Daisy, Johnny Holmes, Norman Granz, Ray Brown, and Nat Cole. (Cole is discussed with slightly conflicting information in two separate locations.)

Barris also pays tribute to Helen

McNamara in a chapter on her work and influence in Canadian jazz. But “Oscar and the Jazz Lady” is really more about how Barris himself put on a benefit concert to help pay for McNamara’s medical expenses resulting from Parkinson’s disease. Peterson did participate in the concert, but his role is reduced that of a supporting character. Still, the chapter holds together better than most because Barris simply tells the story instead of tediously relying on other sources. It is clear that Barris has led a fascinating life as a journalist and broadcaster, and could probably write a very interesting autobiography.

Alex Barris holds his subject in the highest esteem. The photographs selected for inclusion capture the jazz virtuoso in his glory. But in spite of some engaging passages, *Oscar Peterson* suffers from poor editing, inconsistent writing, and patchy scholarship. Barris does share and celebrate Peterson’s public achievements. But aside from some personal reflections and reminiscences, he offers little that cannot be found elsewhere.

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Works Cited

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- Peterson, Oscar, with Palmer, Richard. 2002. *A Jazz Odyssey: The Life of Oscar Peterson*. New York: Continuum.