

**A Jazz Odyssey: The Life of Oscar Peterson.** By Oscar Peterson; Richard Palmer, editor and consultant. London: Continuum, 2002. 382 p. \$45.00 ISBN 0-8264-5807-6

Autobiographies of famous people are like double-edged swords in that they can expose aspects of an individual's life that are not particularly interesting or flattering, but can also offer answers to pertinent questions about what drives an individual. Oscar Peterson's autobiography on the whole deals appropriately with these questions: personal and musical influence, musicality, friendship, and—significantly—racial discrimination all appear. The latter is worth mentioning since it figures prominently in the book, and given the fact that Peterson grew up in Montreal during the 1940s, it should give us pause to think about the Canadian experience for visible minorities.

The book begins chronologically, with Peterson recounting the discipline instilled in him by his father, a West Indian immigrant who became a railway porter in Montreal. His father was frequently away but, when he was home, he thoroughly grilled the children on what they had practiced on their musical instruments. Oscar's older sister, Daisy, managed to live up to her father's expectations, but young Oscar tried everything possible to avoid having his father discover he had not practiced. His procrastination continued with a number of piano teachers, to the point where one teacher simply asked him to hand over the payment and stop wasting his time. Eventually, of course, Peterson began to practice seriously, inspired initially by recordings of Teddy Wilson, and later by Art Tatum. Along the way, he also discovered a few maxims and techniques for himself, including the belief that harmony was the governing factor in jazz improvisation (p. 30) and a way of fingering

that allowed for more control of the lightning runs we all have come to recognize as his trademark (pp. 288-89). So, aside from an abundance of musical talent, it was a combination of classical piano technique, a love for virtuoso jazz pianists, and several personal musical discoveries that contributed to Peterson becoming a virtuoso, and perhaps the world's most well-known jazz pianist.

Peterson's early professional years—the late 1940s—are discussed in some detail, with anecdotes and descriptions of various Montreal area musicians, his years at the Alberta Lounge, and his discovery by impresario Norman Granz. Granz subsequently arranged for Peterson's unauthorized appearance at Carnegie Hall in 1949 by having him sit in the audience and inviting him to the stage to sit in with the group, thereby avoiding the need for a work visa. This career-launching debut formed the start of a lifelong professional and personal relationship between the two men. In fact, Granz looms large in the book, with a small section and a substantial number of stories devoted to him; it is clear that Peterson feared and respected him, and that he played a large role in his career.<sup>1</sup>

Chronology is more or less abandoned after the early years as chapters deal with individual musicians or specific issues. A good portion of the book is devoted to a series of mini-portraits of some of the many musicians Peterson has played with over the years, enhanced with humorous on-the-road

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<sup>1</sup>As an aside, it is interesting to compare Peterson's experience with Granz to that of the similarly looming presence of NHL hockey coach Scott Bowman in Ken Dryden's *The Game*.

anecdotes. And several of Peterson's heroes—Art Tatum, Count Basie, and Norman Granz—are lionized through homespun poetic interludes. Needless to say, Peterson has shared the stage with a who's who of the jazz world, including Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Carmen McRae, Joe Pass, Duke Ellington, Herb Ellis, Phineas Newborn and, of course, Ray Brown and Niels Pederson, Peterson's mainstay bassists. Luckily the book contains a "Cast of Characters," so that if you find yourself lost in the multitude of names, you can easily look it up. The focus of these portraits is to give the reader a sense of what it was like to play with these musicians by frankly describing their musical mannerisms and personality traits. The anecdotes also underline the role that musical rivalry played in Peterson's world and the jazz world at large, perhaps not altogether surprising given his reputation as a virtuoso. (As an aside, it is odd that some of these stories are repeated in slightly different forms in other parts of the book, leaving one to wonder why the editor did not remove them.)

The issue of racism crops up in various places in the book, including a section called "Matters Political,"<sup>2</sup> almost to the point of providing a thread through Peterson's life and career. The incidents described range from being denied access to hotels during

the Jazz at the Philharmonic tours, to being called a "nigger" by complete strangers, to his daughter being humiliated on her first day of school. Peterson is careful to point out that Canada's racism is perhaps not as overt as that in the United States, but that it nevertheless exists, especially in the music business. In a peculiar fashion, the term "Negro" is used throughout most of the book and at one point, in discussing Granz's "uncanny racial understanding," Peterson claims that "it is really very difficult to have a really penetrating conversation with whites, however unprejudiced they may be, unless they have the breadth and toughness of mind to recognize the fear, inhibition, and even intolerance are common to all blacks" (p. 120). His analysis may be somewhat muddled, but the issues are real.

The book reads well, with anecdotes and opinions kept brief and delivered in a warm yet gently detached voice. We get a good sense of what it means to be a full-time jazz musician—with its toll on family life (four marriages)—the thrill of playing with some of the best musicians in the world, the rise to stardom, and being courted and admired by royalty and wealthy patrons. All in all, the sheer magnitude of Peterson's career is mind-boggling. I can think of no other jazz musician who has had such an extensive performing and recording career, not to mention the numerous awards and functions.

*Rob van der Blik*  
*Sound and Moving Image Library*  
*York University*

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<sup>2</sup> A second theme, also elaborated in this chapter, is the general lack of support for jazz, with Peterson even going so far as to say that jazz "has suffered betrayal, calculated assimilation, and attempted annihilation...." (p. 339).