

Oliver Jones: The Musician, The Man. By Marthe Sansregret. Montreal: YYY Publishing, 2006. xi, 348 p., ill. ISBN 978-1-894852-22-7. \$29.95. [originally published as *Oliver Jones: Le Musicien et l'homme*. Laval, 2005]

Approaches to biographical accounts of musicians can range from the weaving of a series of anecdotes into a narrative held together by chronology, to in-depth analytical and socio-historical commentary on a musician's life, music and surroundings. We need the anecdotes to bring a person to life, to get a sense of character, but placing these anecdotes in a larger musical or socio-historical context requires a considerable measure of distillation and analysis.

This is the first book on Montreal jazz pianist Oliver Jones, who grew up in the neighbourhood of the older Oscar Peterson and studied with Peterson's sister. After having pursued a career in popular music in the West Indies, Jones returned to Montreal in 1980, already in his forties, to embark on a career as a world renowned jazz performer. The book does not seem to rise above the anecdotal; in instances where Sansregret does attempt to invoke history, the connections are too superficial to be meaningful. The opening paragraph of the first chapter sets the tone: "Oliver went through many different stages before tasting international fame, and through it all ... there was the memory of his ancestors--a memory that would have had him take another path. The source of this memory lay in West Africa many generations ago, when the chiefs of African tribes sold the strongest of their young people as slaves ... Upon their arrival on the island of Barbados, Oliver Jones's ancestors were handed over to a plantation owner, and the relation of a dominating master of a submissive slave began" (p. 1). I have included this quote to illustrate two points: first, the description seems frivolous, lacking in facts, and with the events so far removed from the subject as to be meaningless; second, the style of writing resembles that of juvenile literature, and while this style may make for a pleasant read, it is on the whole uninformative and

sometimes outright irritating. For example: "At first, baby Oliver touched the keys gently, one by one, then started punching them enthusiastically, pumping his arms up and down. Soon, his little fingers were running up and down the keyboard and for sure, the thrill was there. It didn't take long for Oliver to adopt the piano as his companion, his friend." (p. 13) Seldom does Sansregret talk about Jones's music, how it relates to the jazz tradition, and more specifically, Oscar Peterson, with whom Jones has most frequently been compared. And while we need not expect a biography to go into detailed musical description or criticism, considering the length of this book and amount of detail given to other less significant matters, it would have been nice to include more commentary along these lines.

I found myself looking at entries on Jones in the *Canadian Encyclopedia of Music* and *Miller's Companion to Jazz in Canada* to get a clear sense both of Jones's career and his musical style. Sansregret does provide sources (although not referenced in the text) and a servicable discography and videography. I am sure that in some quarters this book will be well-received since it is, after all, a very warm and sympathetic portrait of a remarkable man and musician. The problem is that it adds very little beyond that.

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