

**Oscar Peterson: The Will to Swing.** By Gene Lees. Updated ed.; New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000. 334 p. Paperback. ISBN 0-8154-1021-2 \$28.25

Gene Lees is a multi-talented expatriate Canadian jazz singer, lyricist (“Waltz for Debbie,” “Quiet Night of Quiet Stars”), journalist, editor (currently of the highly regarded *Jazzletter*, formerly of *Down Beat* magazine), and the author of over a dozen books. The hallmarks of his writing are thorough research, deep knowledge and appreciation of his subjects, and a delivery which is informative without being scholarly, and relaxed yet full of élan. *Oscar Peterson: The Will to Swing* is based on numerous taped interviews, a wealth of documentation, including concert reviews and lengthier newspaper and magazine treatments from throughout Peterson’s career, and sources such as archival tapes of early CBC broadcasts by Peterson and the unpublished autobiography of Lou Hooper, an American jazz pianist who taught Peterson in Montreal.

This book is by turns informed, insightful, deep, touching, and masterful. It draws reactions from the reader ranging from belly laughs at some of the practical jokes Peterson and his colleagues, including Lees, have played on each other, to pathos at the portraits of some of the musicians, such as the tenor saxophonist Lester “Prez” Young. The author first met Peterson in 1951, when a barber in Hamilton, Ontario, Lees’s home town, refused to cut the pianist’s hair because he was black. Lees covered the story for the *Hamilton Spectator*, and he and Peterson became fast friends. While Lees shows obvious respect and affection for Peterson in this text, it is not an authorized or “official” biography. It is also not a critical biography written from a quasi-objective point of view.

Perhaps befitting the jazz subject, it conforms to none of the standard biographical

models, but is instead a friendly, sensitive, subjective treatment which draws a sympathetic portrait without falling into the territory of promotional or fan-mag copy. Lees is a master story-teller who tells Oscar Peterson’s story via the gigs he has played and the people who have played with him, a veritable Who’s Who of jazz greats. It unfolds in a series of tableaux focused on aspects of jazz and on well-known jazz personalities, from Norman Granz, who gave Peterson his first break in the big-time, to Ray Brown, the bassist who has played in several of Peterson’s ensembles, to Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie, and on and on. Peterson is the thread which joins it all together.

The writing is unpredictable, almost improvisational, and the text is full of elaborations and digressions from the narrative flow, some of which make for fascinating side trips while others are less successful, even intrusive. For example, while the two-page primer on what to Lees constitutes jazz and swing, in the chapter entitled “A Rich Tradition,” is a model of succinct and pertinent information, particularly for the uninitiated, the riff on equal temperament and the origins of the piano in the same chapter seems a little forced and coincidentally implies that the Bach who worked for Frederick the Great wrote the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Oops!

Though such errors are rare, I found the discursive approach, which showcases Lees’s encyclopedic knowledge of music, musicians, and other topics (including William Blake and Northrop Frye) left in question some of the author’s choices of chapter headings. One that comes to mind, entitled “Service to Canada,” covers Peterson’s lobbying efforts

to encourage greater minority representation in media advertising and ends by listing honours, both Canadian and foreign, he has received. Unless I missed it, the chapter never did get to Peterson's service to Canada, *per se*, which ostensibly should include some mention of his teaching and mentoring, and his many efforts to foster music (and specifically jazz) education in the country.

The book also lacks in-depth analysis of the musical dimension of Peterson's career from the author's perspective: for example, a discussion of the pianist's evolution from a boogie-woogie-playing heart-throb for Montreal teens to the ranks of international stardom. When the discussion does turn to things musical, Lees the journalist generally prefers to quote others and then react to their statements. While he does examine some larger ethical and aesthetic issues surrounding jazz criticism, and such topics as Peterson's commitment to touring for many years and the dangers of over-exposure, he left the pianist's personal life outside the scope of this study. Marrying four times and fathering seven children presumably taught Peterson some hard lessons about the conflicting demands of career and family, but the biographer avoids those issues completely.

He also bypasses other territory one might have expected to find in a biography of Peterson. For example, though ample coverage is afforded such perennial Peterson collaborators as his long-time manager Norman Granz, his first guitarist Herb Ellis, the drummer Ed Thigpen, and Ray Brown, mentioned above, there is little coverage of his collaborations with others, including the Danish bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, with whom Peterson has worked a great deal since the early 1970s, the guitarist Joe Pass, the drummer Bobby Durham, and others who have worked with him in the past 25 years.

At times the writing is quirky and argumentative. Based presumably on the fact that Oscar Peterson, the trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, the trombonist Butch Watanabe, and others who went on to play professionally all attended Montreal High School, Lees contends that a "grade 10 education there gave a student a better background than a couple of years in some U.S. universities." There are also spirited rebuttals of the treatment Peterson has received at the hands of music critics who accuse him of empty virtuosity and a lack of originality.

Then there is the topic of racism. Given the circumstances of Lees' first encounter with Peterson, the backdrop of racial prejudice which led the CBC to refer to Peterson in the 1940s as "the Brown Bomber of Boogie-Woogie" and the management of the Ritz Carleton Hotel in Montreal to demand that the bandleader, Johnny Holmes, drop Peterson from an engagement there (he refused), and the blatant discrimination experienced by Peterson and other black musicians touring with Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic ensembles in the U.S. in the 1950s, it was to be expected that Lees would not ignore this issue. He may have ended up devoting too much space to it, or perhaps too much effort, as I think he also does defending Peterson from the critics. Peterson himself has preferred to work behind the scenes for many years, fund-raising, letter-writing, lobbying, and in other constructive ways to mitigate the effects of earlier discriminatory attitudes and policies. Airing grievances in public is not Peterson's style.

This "updated edition" (the book was originally published in 1988) contains one textual amendment and a new chapter which covers events in Peterson's life for the past twelve years, including his appointment as chancellor of Toronto's York University, his stroke and partial recovery, and a cancelled North American big-band tour. While the

original parts of the book are richly detailed and obviously based on many hours spent with Peterson, as well as with his colleagues, family, and friends, one gets the strong impression from the new final chapter that there was no contact between the author and his subject concerning that material. Old issues, such as Peterson versus the critics, are rehashed, and the new events in his life are covered from a third-person perspective lacking the impact of personal communication between Lees and the pianist. One wonders if there has been a falling out between the old friends, or whether the new chapter was hastily produced and busy schedules did not allow for timely interaction between them. Whatever the case, it disappoints by not maintaining the personal perspective of the original text, and by not giving a definitive explanation of the cancelled Swing Magic tour, which resulted in serious financial losses for several people and the loss of friends by Peterson.

Despite such shortcomings, this biography is a warm tribute by one Canadian virtuoso to another, and it merits a place on

the bookshelves of all fans of Oscar Peterson. It covers a lot of territory and, through meticulous cross-checking, sets the record straight on several episodes in Peterson's life, including his "discovery" by Granz. Lees's coverage of the little-known Black Forest interlude in the pianist's career is particularly fascinating, as it gives the reader greater insight into the private person whose career has been so public. Most of all, the writer's assertive confidence and craft make this book a great read. One could say that it is the prose equivalent of a fine performance by such masterful swing artists as the Count Basie Band or the Oscar Peterson Trio: "grooving" easily just slightly behind a rock-solid beat, but capable of breaking out at any moment in muscular "shout" choruses that quickly transform an audience's reaction from quiet toe-tapping to lusty cheers. For the territory this book covers, and for the style in which Gene Lees covers it, he deserves a standing "O."

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