

**Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada, 1914-1949.** By Mark Miller. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997. 288 p. \$19.95. ISBN 1-55128-046-9.

This book will remain for many years - indeed, perhaps for all time - the definitive historical account of the introduction and dissemination of jazz in Canada in the first half of the 20th century. Miller writes that his research involved doing "music historiography as a form of archeology" (p. 7), and he has indeed unearthed a rich trove of documentary evidence from an astounding variety of sources. Books, newspaper and periodical reports, city and telephone directories, census records, musicians' union dues ledgers, and even Eaton's catalogues were examined to shed light on the growth and development of jazz in Canada. Seventy-five people were interviewed in the course of researching the book, and other assistance was received from over 100 people in four countries. Out of the massive amount of material thus painstakingly assembled, Miller has fashioned a lively, literate, and engaging narrative account of a subject that is obviously very close to his heart. The book has been beautifully produced in paperback format by The Mercury Press, and is generously filled out with 75 black-and-white photos and illustrations.

This is the first national history of jazz in Canada, and along with similar such studies devoted to jazz in Britain, Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Australia, it contributes to our understanding of the processes by which jazz transcended its American origins and became a truly international phenomenon. Miller has closely examined the conditions in Canada which fostered a climate for the appreciation of jazz. Historical and cultural events that shaped Canada during this period - two world wars, the Great Depression, race relations and the legacy of the Underground Railroad, liquor and labour laws, the rise of the recording and film industries, and much else besides - are woven seamlessly into Miller's narrative. This is in contrast to

American jazz histories, which have tended to regard Canada not as another country with its own cultural, historical, and musical conditions, but rather, in Miller's memorable phrase, as "simply the next stop after Bellingham, Bismarck or Buffalo" (p. 9).

Miller points out that the history of jazz in Canada is one of "local and regional rather than national perspectives" (p. 19). Musicians in Montreal, for instance, were aware of what was going on in New York but quite ignorant of the jazz scene in Toronto. One of the many fascinating aspects of Miller's book is that it allows the reader to trace the gradual emergence of a national jazz context in Canada, a context created by the steady expansion of recordings, radio broadcasts, and touring by Canadian jazz artists. These three elements were all firmly in place by the 1940s, and helped to make Oscar Peterson Canada's first national jazz star. His recordings for RCA Victor in Montréal and his CBC broadcasts had made Peterson so well known nationally that his Winnipeg debut drew 4,000 people in 1946, three years before his legendary appearance with Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic in New York's Carnegie Hall propelled him to the front of the ranks of the jazz pianists of his day.

The precision of Miller's research is indicated by the fact that his historical account begins on Monday, Sept. 21, 1914, shortly after 2:30 p.m., with the appearance of the Creole Band of New Orleans in Winnipeg, and ends on Sept. 18, 1949, sometime after 9:30 p.m., with Peterson's New York debut. These two events, the first introducing jazz to a Canadian audience and the second introducing Canada's most famous jazz musician to an American audience, frame this account of 35 years of jazz history in Canada. Some of the topics

that Miller covers are familiar from previous accounts: Jelly Roll Morton's residence in Vancouver; the activities of Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians; the story of the misleadingly named Casa Loma Orchestra (an American swing orchestra that was in residence at Toronto's Casa Loma for less than a year out of its 20-year history); the visits to Canada by the likes of Billie Holiday, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker; and the careers of Canadian-born musicians such as Shelton Brooks, Georgie Auld, Maynard Ferguson, Moe Koffman, and Oscar Peterson. But in covering such prominent figures as these, Miller never simply recycles the existing research; instead his meticulous, scholarly approach has enabled him to clarify and correct the historical record in many cases. And beyond that, Miller has unearthed the stories of dozens of lesser known artists whose contributions were vital in fostering and spreading an appreciation for jazz.

Miller writes from a truly national perspective, covering the developing jazz scene in Canada from Victoria to St. John's, and discussing events in cities and towns large and small from one end of the country to the other. The early chapters of the book deal largely with visits to Canada by American jazz musicians; in the second half of the book, musicians born or resident in Canada eventually become the main focus of the narrative. In effect, then, Miller has written two books in one: the first reveals the early history of jazz in Canada, and the second chronicles the rise of Canadian jazz. Miller's exhaustive archival research sheds light, often for the first time, on the period from 1914 to the 1920s, while for the more

recent era the written documentation is supplemented by first-hand reports garnered through interviews with surviving jazz musicians, which lend rich colour and substance to the record.

The sacrifices which Canadian jazz musicians have made to devote themselves to this captivating and uncompromising means of self-expression are astonishing. But the pursuit of excellence took a heavy toll on the lives of some of them, the details of which make for shocking reading. In chapter 12, for instance, Miller relates the story of Ollie Wagner, a gifted Swing-era tenor sax player who was born in Wichita ca. 1907, but spent his career in Canada. Wagner had a busy life in jazz, working mostly in western Canada as a trumpeter, pianist, arranger, and singer in addition to playing the saxophone. His contemporaries did not hesitate to place him in the same league as the great American jazz players of his day. Nevertheless, Wagner sometimes had to ride the rails to get from gig to gig, and on at least one occasion he spent time in jail when he got caught. Later in life, to support himself financially, he shovelled coal for the CPR, worked as a roofer, and at one point had to shine shoes for a living! Sadly, Wagner made no recordings, so it is only through the testimony of his contemporaries that his memory lives on. Wagner's is just one of dozens of such compelling stories that Miller tells in this important publication, a book that will forever inform and fascinate anyone with even a passing interest in jazz or music in Canada.

*Robin Elliott*  
*University College Dublin*