



[*Statesman of the Piano: Jazz, Race, and History in the Life of Lou Hooper*](#) edited by Sean Mills, Eric Fillion, and Désirée Rochat, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023, 262 pp. CAN \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-2280-1880-3.

Reviewed by Risa Tonita, Vancouver Community College.

Statesman of the Piano is a fantastic and necessary addition to the little extant scholarship on Black musicians in Canada. Lou Hooper's autobiography and the accompanying essays by both emerging and well-established scholars address significant topics surrounding the musician's race including the un/silencing of voices, difficulties in accessing archival materials, and shifting the narrative towards dignified Black lives. All the materials in this book are accessible to any reader interested in

autobiography, and Hooper's story is one that should be taught and studied in all Canadian and American post-secondary institutions.

As the title *That Happy Road* suggests, Lou Hooper's autobiography tells a tale of a life lived fully and happily. While his life was not always easy as a Black musician in mid-twentieth century North America, Hooper found joy and fulfillment in his myriad relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. His autobiography contributes to the current academic discussions of relationality, identity, difference, and self-expression within the context of music performance in Canada and in the context of Black lives in the Americas.

Throughout his autobiography, Hooper shares stories of life as a Black musician living in Ypsilanti, Detroit, New York City, Toronto, Montréal, and travelling throughout Europe as a Canadian military musician. He describes early childhood experiences with music such as daily music classes at school, singing in the church choir, listening to music on his sister's Edison phonograph, and hearing a pianist playing ragtime tunes outside of the sideshow at the circus. He shares details of starting the Hooper Brothers' Orchestra, joining the musicians' union at the age of sixteen, enrolling in the Detroit Conservatory of Music shortly after his eighteenth birthday, and recording music for commercial records. All the stories involve connections to people who deeply impacted Hooper's life and career. Often, Hooper discusses the complexities of being Black and the racism that he faced throughout his life. However, his stories always end with an optimistic tone highlighting the musician's focus throughout his autobiography on the fulfilment he felt in life.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Although Hooper lists a significant number of prominent musicians with whom he had the pleasure of working, his stories always express his deep humility and the respect that he felt for each. It is evident in reading Hooper's autobiography that he felt honoured to know and to make music with each person that he encountered in his professional life. To him, they were "part of the tapestry of [his] life."¹ Furthermore, he expresses the enjoyment of playing music for men in hospitals during the Second World War and even wonders if he should not be thanking the men for whom he played just as much as they thanked him for having played for them. Hooper's sense of self and his ability to self-reflect are evidence of his strong positionality as a person who was always in relation to others—someone who was always learning from his interactions with others, willing to ask himself challenging questions, and one who genuinely appreciated meaningful time with friends, family, and others.

The accompanying essays by Sunita Nigam, Jason Wilson, Arshad Suliman Desai, Kristen Young, and Julie Richard provide rich and engaging discussions about various aspects of Hooper's life and work as a Black musician. They challenge readers to explore Hooper's life through different lenses and to reflect on the continued lack of visibility of Black musicians in jazz and classical music scholarship in 2025. Nigam's essay on ecobiography offers readers the opportunity to reflect on Hooper's life in relation to his geographic locations whereas Wilson's essay focuses solely on Hooper's work and life as a military musician. By contrast, the essays by Desai and Young highlight the complexities of accessing archival materials; the continued perpetuation of power dynamics within archival collections creates gaps in the available and accessible materials. Young's essay, in particular, advocates for making archival collections accessible to communities through workshops and naming events in order to facilitate discussions and to grow and heal in unity. Finally, Richard's essay offers readers the opportunity to think critically about Hooper's own compositions and his musical style. In particular, she encourages readers to consider Hooper as a classical musician as much as a jazz musician. She finishes her essay by stating the challenges of archiving classical music by Black composers in Canada and argues for the continuation of research and of creation so that others who are likely to go unrecognized can be acknowledged.

Hooper's autobiography, together with the accompanying archival documents, the collected essays, and the contributions of the co-editors, Sean Mills, Eric Fillion, and Désirée Rochat, form a powerful contribution to Canadian music scholarship. Each individual component of *Statesman of the Piano* encourages deep thought about Canada's musical history, the current efforts that many scholars are making to "unsilence" voices, and the possibilities for a more inclusive future in classical and jazz music-making and archiving in Canada. The juxtaposition of Hooper's intimate writing with the academic writing of the other contributions to the book provide the reader with a moving experience of exploring one person's life through various lenses. Especially notable are the archival documents that have been included following Hooper's autobiography; materials such as these are

¹ Louis Hooper, "That Happy Road," in *Statesman of the Piano: Jazz, Race, and History in the Life of Lou Hooper*, ed. Sean Mills, Eric Fillion, and Désirée Rochat (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023), 57.

rarely made available outside of archival collections. Finally, although Hooper did not complete his autobiography—leaving readers with many unanswered questions—the material that he did document is rich, moving, thought-provoking, and inspiring. The reader is left contemplating Hooper’s contributions to Canada’s musical landscape which is, in itself, a significant contribution.