ain't but a few of US

black music writers tell their story

willard jenkins
editor

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introduction

WILLARD JENKINS

Yes, this is a book about one important sector of the music industry, examined from a race perspective; it is a book about race examined from the viewpoint of those who write about jazz and in many cases also chronicle other jazz-informed music. How did we arrive at this unprecedented examination? And what about that curious title, *Ain't But a Few of Us*? The title is a straight lift from the colloquial speech that black jazz musicians and fellow travelers along the African American trail have employed across the ages. The first time I heard it uttered, it stuck. Before or after some long-forgotten performance, the late vibraphone innovator Milt Jackson uttered the phrase in warmly greeting his fellow jazz master and bop-era survivor, the saxophonist Jimmy Heath—as in, "Man, ain't but a few of us . . ." (presumably, from their era left). So it was that the phrase became a compelling sobriquet for what is to follow.

For this observer, recognizing that, where it concerns writing about jazz music and its many extensions (and, some would argue, about *any* music), there truly *ain't* but a few of us—or to extend the theme further, *ain't but a few of us* who have been granted access—has been a bit more of a convoluted journey. That journey for me began

as a youth coming up in Pittsburgh and living my preteen years through marriage and young fatherhood in Cleveland and Kent, Ohio.

I grew up with a jazz-devoted father and a jazz-welcoming mother: Dad a lifelong newspaperman, Mom an early childhood education professional, both proud college grads. Dad was a record lover, while Mom appreciated most of what he laid on the turntable. And I say she appreciated *most* of it, because I do recall certain things entering the collection that she would humorously side-eye and designate as "that way-out stuff"—for example, a record by the pianist Bobby Timmons, a trio record titled *In Person* that Dad picked up and that forever mesmerized me with Timmons's evocative intro to "Autumn Leaves," with Ron Carter on bass and Albert Heath on drums.

Influenced by Dad's records and, later, when we moved to Cleveland (I was eleven), by my immersion in the city's twenty-four-hour, commercial jazz radio station WCUY (a dinosaur in today's radio universe), I cultivated a deeper schoolboy appreciation for instrumental music than was evidenced by most of my peers. Even in the case of the dominant pop music of the day—the various singing groups like the Temptations, Impressions, O'Jays, Spinners, Marvelettes, and the Supremes, or James Brown, Marvin Gaye, and later Parliament-Funkadelic, the Ohio Players, and so on—I developed what I suppose was an unusual fixation on the instrumental underpinnings of those tunes, the first in my crew to recognize James Jamerson's Motown bass greatness long before knowing his name. (Remember Motown's and other pop labels' ongoing conceit: album jackets lacked instrumentalist credits.) Clearly, an appreciation for that largely instrumental music known as jazz was brewing.

The fever started with records, particularly following Christmas of 1961 when Dad bought one of those huge old console entertainment units—more furniture than audiophile item—that delivered the magic of stereophonic sound to our living room. My younger brother George and I loved spinning that innocuous test record that came with the unit, just to get that glorious stereophonic sound in our ears. Dad's LPs became ever more alluring.

Perhaps the sheer variety of jazz sounds that entranced my ears suggests that WCUY was the real culprit, but one of Dad's records in particular proved especially fascinating, and turned out to be a sort of pathway to expanding my jazz personnel consciousness. It was an otherwise mundane-looking black-and-white-jacketed number titled *The Best of Argo Jazz*. This was the kind of sampler that record labels released on a fairly regular basis back then to further promote the brand and their artists; also the kind of record often found in then-burgeoning stereo shops as demonstration records.

Easing that compilation album onto the turntable, I was charmed by the exquisite elegance of James Moody's tenor sax essaying "I Remember Clifford" with a lush orchestral string backdrop. To my preteen ears *this* was classical music, hip and elegant by turns. I still have that record—beat my brother to it when Dad passed—and have to chuckle whenever I drag it out these days and hear the snaps and pops throughout that Moody track; residue from where my undisciplined young hands would snatch up the tonearm to repeatedly experience those gorgeous introductory chords.

There were endless aural fascinations on that sampler, and useful additional details were discovered in the jacket information. There were no personnel listings, but the jackets from each artist's track were on display: a (pre-Rahsaan) Roland Kirk wielding three horns simultaneously on *Introducing*; Ahmad Jamal grinning out from his *Happy Moods* cover; Al Grey (whose track is a definitive swinging shuffle) perched astride a stool in elegant suit and plaid vest, trombone resting at his side; Art Farmer and Benny Golson (in the Jazztet) relaxing and smiling amid some cityscape, looking like Mad Men of jazz in suits and ties on the cover of *Big City Sounds*; and Lorez Alexandria elegantly wrapped in come-hither glory on *Sing No Sad Songs for Me*.

Thus commenced the record jacket curriculum of my jazz education, particularly from those records that proffered what were referred to as "annotated notes" and detailed personnel listings. If someone other than the leader on a given record date truly stood out to those young ears, he or she became the focus of subsequent record-hunting expeditions. The expansion of my knowledge of who was who in this music called jazz, and the growing thirst for those new sounds, continued to escalate.

Fast-forward to college days, when I became a sort of go-to guy for new records in my circle at Kent State University—both jazz and otherwise—particularly among my Omega Psi Phi brothers. My insatiable thirst for the latest sides knew few bounds. My lack of wheels for the thirty-five-mile foray north to Cleveland's record stores was no impediment; I'd resort to commandeering the cars of girlfriends or underclassmen (thank you, Bro. Tim Moore) for the trek. In those days, records were often released regionally in increments rather than according to the nationally orchestrated release practices still to come, and so the latest would arrive in Cleveland record stores before they'd trickle down to Kent.

In particular the latest Miles Davis records became an insatiable passion once an aware upperclassman named Larry Young hipped me to *Miles Smiles*. And by then James Brown (what a band!), Sly Stone, Jimi Hendrix, Cream,

Earth, Wind & Fire (I was the first on campus with their original Warner Bros. launch), Parliament-Funkadelic (actually Parliament *and* Funkadelic, before it became clear that they shared personnel in George Clinton's brilliant marketing scheme), Led Zeppelin, and all sorts of progressive rock–related music (particularly when that music bore some elements of instrumental prowess, which those bands certainly did) had also deeply invaded the consciousness, stoking the growing record collection. Remember, unlike the singing groups of grade school days, these were self-contained bands that played their own instruments!

The kid lost his mind when Miles jumped into the electric pool with *In a Silent Way*, followed by the landmark *Bitches Brew*. Upon their respective release dates I commandeered a ride and hustled up to Record Rendezvous, in downtown Cleveland, to cop each of those—quick, fast, and in a hurry!

The times were indeed a-changing, and along with Kent State's growing antiwar movement—which would culminate in that infamous day May 4, 1970, when four KSU students were gunned down by the Ohio National Guard—black student consciousness was growing in that roiling era. A small group of my peers founded Black United Students (BUS), and the collective consciousness of our black student body grew exponentially.

In 1968 the Oakland Police Department was recognized in the black liberation movement for its open oppression of the Black Panther Party in its California birthplace. The OPD got the bright idea to make Kent State part of an audacious national recruiting tour. Our Black United Students organization was having none of that, and we fomented a Thursday afternoon demonstration that escalated from sit-in to outright takeover of one of the KSU administrative buildings.

By that Thursday evening, we had been alerted that the campus police, assisted by the Kent PD and Ohio state troopers, had begun to encircle the building with buses, with the clear intent of forcibly ousting us from the building in a mass jailing. We quickly hatched a plan to march out peaceably and avoid whatever bloodshed, not to mention parental disapproval, might have resulted from that forced removal and arrest. By the weekend, our righteous anger continuing to escalate, we developed a unified plan to further demonstrate our grit and opposition by marching on campus that Monday and symbolically walking out.

Our show of determination and numbers proved successful. We developed a manifesto of demands, most of which were met by an administration eager to avoid an escalation of black student hostilities. Our demands

included an insistence that Kent State develop a black student center and black studies curriculum (today's Center of Pan-African Culture, which houses the school's Department of Africana Studies).

That progress spurred the publication of our black student newspaper, the *Black Watch*. Having always enjoyed writing, I signed up. Early on I sought insights from writers I'd been devouring in the jazz prints, like Dan Morgenstern, Leonard Feather, Ira Gitler, Martin Williams, Alan Heineman, and Frank Kofsky—to try my hand at writing about the joys and occasional missteps of jazz music. Thus began my jazz writing pursuits, contributing record reviews to the *Black Watch*.

As my writing persevered, lo and behold, an exceedingly pleasant development arose for this broke college student: completely unsolicited, major record labels like Atlantic Records began sending me their latest releases to review! Another revelation was that, suddenly, I qualified for occasional press accommodations at jazz performances, at places like Cleveland's now-legendary Smiling Dog Saloon. It was there that I at long last witnessed the glories of Miles, Mingus, the earliest incarnations of Weather Report and Return to Forever (Brazilian edition, with Airto and Flora), Herbie Hancock (Mwandishi septet edition); spent a glorious evening with the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra on a rare foray away from their traditional Monday nights at the Village Vanguard; and experienced a mind-blowing month-long residency by the Sun Ra Arkestra (in full force, with costuming, dancers, June Tyson singing, and backdrop films illustrating Ra's Egyptology), among other live performance revelations. Space was indeed the place! It was on; clearly this writing about jazz might lead to something!

A bachelor's degree in sociology bought me a ten-year career in public service. But my newspaperman dad came to the rescue. He had matriculated as a typographer and proofreader through the black dispatch (from Cleveland's *Call & Post* to the legendary *Pittsburgh Courier*) and on to Pittsburgh's late *Sun Telegraph* afternoon daily, as part of the first wave of professional African Americans working at daily papers, to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. We landed in Cleveland, through his industrious typographer's union, when the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* bought out the *Sun Telegraph*, a sale portending the end of the two–daily newspaper towns. Dad hooked up his postgrad wannabe-jazz-writer son with a man named Bob Roach, the editor of the *Plain Dealer*'s weekly *Friday Magazine* entertainment section.

At the *Friday Magazine* I became a weekly contributor, one of *two* regular jazz writers—the other being the late former WCUY jazz DJ Chris Colombi, who contributed a weekly record review column. My assignments were to

preview the upcoming weekend's or the following week's jazz performance activity around town. I was mentored a bit in this jazz writing endeavor by an elegant Frenchman with a prodigious record collection, named Bernard Laret, who covered jazz for the rival afternoon paper, the *Cleveland Press*. During that Sun Ra residency, Arkestra members stayed in private homes on Cleveland's east side, and some stopped by Bernard's home for conversation while I was there on one of my pilgrimages.

Now I truly had carte blanche to descend upon jazz performances, not only citywide but all around northeast Ohio, which was particularly useful when nearby Akron hosted two jazz clubs for a hot minute: one was The Bank, so called because its venue was a former savings and loan, where I had my first Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers sighting (the Bobby Watson and James Williams edition).

Initially the greatest resource for those weekly newspaper preview pieces was the Smiling Dog Saloon, where the owner Roger Bohn was beginning to branch out into jazz concert production at the old Allen Theatre downtown. He presented several iterations of Miles's murky, early 1970s prehiatus electric jazz unit (in the time of Mtume, Pete Cosey, Michael Henderson, Reggie Lucas, Al Foster, Sonny Fortune—and one edition boasting three guitarists!). One such tour stop yielded my only interview encounter with Miles. Bohn's Allen Theatre efforts also presented a particularly sublime evening with the Keith Jarrett Quartet that featured Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden, and Paul Motian.

The Dog had a great run, but like most jazz clubs it flamed out, the end arriving in 1975 amid pointed opposition from its residential neighbors, opposition served up with an entrée of racial tension. The Smiling Dog was located on the near West Side, just west of downtown and the Cuyahoga River. Back then East was black, West was white, the river being the line of demarcation; gentrification and other factors have changed that equation in twenty-first-century Cleveland, but in those days that was the rule—and never the twain should meet. Given that the Dog was dedicated to jazz, there were more than a few black folks who ventured over to the West Side in search of great sounds; a few, mind you, not exactly a torrent. Seems those relative few sufficiently raised the hackles of the Dog's neighbors to put the heat on their city councilman. The heightened pressure ultimately got the best of Smiling Dog ownership, and the legend was shuttered. The unfortunate upshot was a drought of touring jazz greats passing through town.

In 1974 a new avenue for expressing this writer's commitment to the music opened up when my old friend and Omega brother Mike Brown

bequeathed his WKSU (the radio voice of Kent State) program slot to me; thus was born the weekly Exploration Jazz show. Radio became a new expression for my sense of the music and an additional perch from which to observe the comings and goings of the art form. That volunteer radio pursuit continues today with the Ancient/Future show on WPFW in Washington, DC. A subsequent opportunity to teach jazz survey and jazz history courses at Cleveland State University (at the invitation of Dr. Ed London and the resourceful multisaxophonist-composer-educator Howie Smith) further broadened my immersion in the music.

All these developments, as well as a significant new brick in the foundation that would arrive shortly thereafter, were satellites to the core of my entry point in the jazz crusade: the writing quest. My approach to writing about jazz has always been more about story, history, atmosphere, and an enthusiast's conveyance, with occasional editorializing on elements affecting the overall jazz condition. My sensibility has always been more about seeking converts to the music, and decidedly not about impressing musicians and fellow writers with any measure of technical music acumen. Says here the average jazz enthusiast, or the simply curious, aren't that interested in chord sequencing or any other measure of music science reportage.

Meanwhile my writing endeavors were branching out to a variety of so-called alternative weeklies, which were either citywide or neighborhood-oriented tabloids whose minuscule pay for articles (if anything!) at least granted a certain amount of precious editorial freedom, important for someone developing their craft. Not to mention access to the latest records and press list admission to performances. Eventually my writing opportunities expanded a bit nationally, with assignments from *Cadence* magazine and eventually *JazzTimes* (then still a tabloid) and *DownBeat* magazines. Those opportunities helped grow my perspective to regional live jazz pursuits—for example, a particularly transcendent Sonny Rollins stand in nearby Akron, OH, at a short-lived joint called the Nightclub; or in occasionally traveling to some concert presentation by the exemplary University of Michigan student jazz presenting organization called Eclipse Jazz in Ann Arbor (including another memorable Sun Ra sighting).

Eventually such forays encouraged annual trips to New York for George Wein's post-Newport uprising festivals (when unruly fans drove the Newport gentry crazy and Wein had to vacate that tony burg for a minute), whether it was Newport–New York, the Kool Jazz Festival, or the JVC Jazz Festival. This was also a time when New York's downtown scene was blooming with original expressions, whether that pursuit meant hanging out at Sam and

Beatrice Rivers's Studio Rivbea, Rashied Ali's Alley, the Ladies Fort, Tin Palace, Joe Papp's Public Theater, or old standbys like the Village Vanguard and the Village Gate. So a night at Wein's festival might start with a 7:00 p.m. concert at Carnegie Hall or Lincoln Center and end at 3:00 a.m. nursing a beer in a club or holding up a wall in some steamy loft.

Those New York trips took this writer out of the northeast Ohio cocoon to inevitably encounter other jazz writers covering Wein's festivals, critics I'd known vicariously through the pages of *DownBeat* and other prints: men like Dan Morgenstern, Leonard Feather, and Ira Gitler, and peers like Gary Giddins, Howard Mandel, Lee Jeske, Art Lange, Fred Bouchard, Michael Bourne, and others—none of the above, mind you, were black, nor were there any women writers to be seen in those press sections or lurking around backstage chatting up the headliners for interviews. Special mention must be made here of the George Wein organization's longtime, no-nonsense publicist Charlie Bourgeois for granting festival access to a greenhorn from Cleveland.

Reading about jazz became an expanded pursuit, revealing important archival contributions from African Americans: Amiri Baraka (née LeRoi Jones), A. B. Spellman, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and the contemporary writings of Stanley Crouch, Ron Welburn, and next-gen peers like Don Palmer, Nelson George, Vernon Gibbs, my homeboy Robert Fleming, and later Greg Tate, brothers of my approximate generation versed in jazz, whose prose encompassed other branches of the black music tree. Granted those weren't the writers I encountered on those festival assignments sitting in adjacent press rows at the concert halls where the major Wein festival performances occurred.

My writing exploits advanced, including scoring not only some national print assignments but also international opportunities via *Jazz Forum* (published in Poland—not sure whether my accumulation of Polish coin-of-the-realm zlotys remain in my account there!). A major addition to my jazz exploits came when concert presentation was added to the mix via the Northeast Ohio Jazz Society. An informal group of enthusiasts had founded that late nonprofit organization in 1977, seeking a means of addressing the lack of touring jazz artist performances coming through Cleveland after the passing of the Dog. Connections with still more jazz writers resulted. It was beyond apparent that there were only a small handful of black writers covering jazz in newspapers and magazines, or for that matter authoring jazz books.

Opportunities for black writers on jazz expanded a bit with the 1979 launch of the *Jazz Spotlite News*, published by the jazz enthusiast and gig presenter Jim Harrison. *Jazz Spotlite News* was one of what has been a

minuscule number of jazz-oriented publications that actively sought the black perspective on jazz. Preceding the *Jazz Spotlite News*' black slant on jazz had been such other worthy and lamentably short-lived efforts as Amiri Baraka's *Cricket* and Ron Welburn's *The Grackle*. Succeeding the *Jazz Spotlite News*, with a similar Afrocentric orientation, were the California-based *Jazz Now* and, later, the Brooklyn-based *Pure Jazz*; both provided vehicles for black jazz writers. Recognizing the disparity of black pens chronicling jazz, I contributed enthusiastically to each of these publications, continuing to write about jazz as a freelancer, including in the *Plain Dealer*.

I eagerly departed my social services career in 1983, to assume a hang-fly, one-year contract, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, to conduct a jazz community needs assessment in the former Great Lakes Arts Alliance region (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio). As part of that assignment, I interviewed jazz musicians, educators, performance presenters, radio broadcasters, and whatever journalist-critics I could find in a given community, be they local newspaper writers or freelancers like myself. Despite frequent oral history interview trips to regional cities with historic African American jazz lineages—like Chicago, Detroit, and Indianapolis—I encountered few, if any, regularly contributing African Americans writing on jazz, not even when those cities had a weekly or monthly black newspaper or tabloid; sadly, in their modern evolution those black dispatches were increasingly indifferent to jazz coverage.

In 1985, as a consequence of its undeniably compelling results, and with the tacit encouragement of the National Endowment for the Arts, that needs assessment morphed into a full-time position at the merged Midwest regional arts organization known as Arts Midwest. From our new Minneapolis base, we established the country's first regional jazz service program. As a result of the merger of two former regional arts service organizations, our region had now expanded to include the Upper Midwest states of Iowa, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The black population of those states was not as deeply rooted as in those original four Midwestern states; there would be no revelation of additional black jazz writers in this new territory.

Among other developments at Great Lakes Arts Alliance, and in addition to those fact-finding and needs-assessment trips, I published a quarterly jazz newsletter. I set out to eventually expand the *Jazzletter* beyond my own writing to encourage a broad sampling of bylines. This was important because, despite the evident lack of diversity in who was covering jazz, there was also no evidence of any outreach on the part of the traditional

jazz prints to expand the diversity of their contributor pool, nor any sense of their recognizing this disparity. The eternal puzzle: a music, born largely out of the African experience in America, reported on journalistically by people almost totally outside of that experience!

At Arts Midwest, which encouraged a fully vested Jazz Program as part of the merger, the quarterly regional *Jazzletter* continued to cast its net wide for aspiring jazz writers of any stripe, including black and women contributors (the gender gap in jazz writing—food for another meal—has always been even broader than the ethnic diversity gap); only a few black or women contributors answered that call from this vast region. The *Jazzletter* was one cornerstone of our program of services to the jazz community, which also included producing technical assistance workshops around the region, writing a series of professional development booklets, and building a regional jazz database. The *Jazzletter* began to gain some visibility and traction, at least in our region, and it led to our producing the first regional jazz media conference.

Held in 1987 on the campus of the University of Illinois Chicago, the conference—which featured guest speakers, workshops, panel discussions, and performance opportunities—had a mission to serve as an initial gathering of regional jazz media personnel and resources, to be joined by writers and jazz radio broadcasters from around the country to interact and share ideas with our regional conferees. The assembled writers seized the opportunity to begin discussions that resulted in the formation of the Jazz Journalists Association (JJA), which carries on today under Howard Mandel's leadership with an international membership and which pre-pandemic produced the annual Jazz Awards show in New York City.

Throughout this time, I continued to keep mental notes on the few black music writers I read or otherwise encountered on travels. One such writer was the Harlemite Clarence Atkins, who at the time contributed writing on jazz to the historic black dispatch the *Amsterdam News*. When Mr. Atkins passed in 2004, a modest sum of funds was earmarked by the JJA to support young black writers interested in jazz. In 2006 the JJA created a limited Clarence Atkins scholarship fund with the express purpose of assisting a handful of young, aspiring African American music writers to attend a national arts critics' conference in California. (Two recipients of that Clarence Atkins fund subsequently contributed to the *Ain't But a Few of Us* interview series.)

Fast-forward to 2010 and a lot has gone down in the ensuing years, but the number of black writers on jazz in the mainstream jazz prints and general interest publications remained modest. Continuing to ponder the relative

scarcity of black music writers, I began a series of interviews with African American writers on my blog, the *Independent Ear*, at the Open Sky Jazz website. Interest in the series, which was fueled by assorted conversations and a specific set of emailed questions, was quite significant and encouraging, certainly judging by the comments section; instant feedback being one of the benefits of our twenty-first-century electronic media universe.

As opposed to conventional interviewing—with a recorder and an ensuing arduous transcription process—our methodology involved emailing questions to participating writers. This afforded the participating writers more time to broadly express and edit their contributions before submitting their responses for editing and publication in our series, and it allowed us to achieve a broader geographic outreach. Our interview questions included common inquiries and were also more often than not tailored to the specific writer.

Back at Arts Midwest, because we were the only regional arts agency (or state arts agency, for that matter) with a Jazz Program, I became a sort of go-to "jazz guy" for arts councils and arts service organizations around the country, including being asked to represent the art form on numerous funding panels. That work began to expand my multidisciplinary arts perspective, with a particular eye toward multidisciplinary audience development initiatives, feeding the viewpoint that audience development remains a major pursuit for those presenting jazz. I began to write from a broader arts perspective. My writing focus has often been less on the personalities of jazz and the science of music than on more systemic matters.

These broader jazz industry perspectives have included that abiding interest in audience development, perceived disparities in how jazz musicians and bands so seldom operate in a manner befitting the need to grow the jazz audience, and other issues relative to jazz preservation and the vehicles and venues through which the music is disseminated to the public. For that wider lens, I have to point to my years in arts administration and eventually in jazz presenting; those respective stations have clearly colored my overall sense of the art form.

The online *Ain't But a Few of Us* series of interviews and dialogues commenced on May 21, 2009, with the author, poet, and arts administrator A. B. Spellman, author of one of the foremost books of jazz artist interviews, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (1966), subsequently abbreviated and reissued as *Four Jazz Lives* (2011). The four subjects at the core of Spellman's book are Herbie Nichols, Jackie McLean, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor. The tone and tenor of those interviews suggests that Spellman may well have

been seen by his interview subjects as a somewhat sympathetic inquisitor—a black jazz writer—with subsequent suggestions that Spellman may have elicited a deeper sense of response because of who he was. (The same held true in Arthur Taylor's important book, *Notes and Tones*.)

Our initial interview with Spellman was published with the subtitle "How Black Jazz Writers Persevere," which would be altered in subsequent installments to "Black Jazz Writers Tell Their Story." The introductory paragraphs in the original *Ain't But a Few of Us* online series provided the reader with the following context relative to our mission:

> Despite the historic origins of this music called jazz, a unique development of the African experience in America, the ranks of black critics and journalists covering the music has always been thin. Black jazz writers have been inspired through the years by the examples of Ralph Ellison, Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), Albert Murray and more recently Stanley Crouch . . . and few others. The Jazz Journalists Association has a handful of currently active black writers on its rolls. Major jazz festivals such as Montreal, Monterey, Northsea, and Umbria, which have long been annual congress for jazz writers who generally operate pretty much in splendid isolation, rarely find more than one black writer in their coverage pool.
>
> Your correspondent has been writing about the music from various perspectives since my undergrad years in the early 1970s at Kent State University. In that time I've been privileged to have numerous off-the-record conversations with artists who have occasionally questioned why there are so few black jazz writers. In that spirit we began a series of conversations posing the same set of questions to black jazz writers on how they got started and their perspective as members of a tiny subset of the fraternity of jazz writers.

A. B. Spellman was an apt starting point, as I had known him and his activist wife Karen Spellman from around the Washington, DC, arts and culture environs. A.B. is greatly respected as a keen observer of the music, from his days contributing to *Metronome* and *DownBeat* magazines to his authorship of *Four Lives* and his work as a published poet. I had also known A.B. from my arts administration work; he retired from a distinguished career at the National Endowment for the Arts, where he continued to champion jazz artists and was one of the catalysts behind the NEA Jazz Masters program. Upon his retirement from the NEA, then-chairman Dana Gioia introduced the A. B. Spellman Award for jazz advocacy as part of the annual NEA Jazz

Masters program to provide fellowships to those who have contributed indelibly to jazz from off the bandstand.

For the second and third installments of the series I purposely sought out dialogues with two younger jazz writers with whom I had enjoyed a friendly and mentoring relationship. John Murph and Eugene Holley Jr. had worked with me at the former National Jazz Service Organization, and both have continued their jazz writing. Murph has worked as a regular contributor for the two mainstream jazz periodicals, *DownBeat* and *JazzTimes*, as well as for *Jazzwise* in the UK and various crossover publications both online and in print. Murph, a proud gay man, has written perhaps the most definitive article to date—included here in the anthology section—on openly gay jazz musicians. The second contributor, Eugene Holley Jr., has written for both traditional and online publications on jazz, including more recent contributions to such general readership outlets as *Publishers Weekly*, the *Village Voice*, *Ebony*, Amazon.com, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the broad-based music magazine *Wax Poetics*. Holley's rangy choice of music subjects is something of a hallmark of the writers who have contributed to this series of dialogues, most of whom cover other musical genres and additional areas of interest, including sports, cuisine, wine, and politics.

As the series has evolved, the goal has been to include black writers from several different perspectives and stations in the media pursuit. Additionally, I sought contributions from fellow travelers for whom writing about the music represents part of a diverse portfolio of other related work, including from broadcasters, arts presenters, and full-time educators—none are full-time jazz writers.

The range of writers contributing to our series has been broad: including book authors, newspaper and periodical contributors, online media journalists, black dispatch scribes, educators, and publisher-editors. This book represents a variety of viewpoints and vantage points, but inevitably the dialogue leads back to considerations of that specious, man-made construct known as race.

In his contribution to the extensive compilation and anthology *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* (assembled by jazz musician-scholar Bill Kirchner), the writer (and contributor to *Ain't But a Few of Us*) Ron Welburn notes the development of jazz criticism at its beginning stages, ironically nominating the great early twentieth-century African American proto-jazz pioneer bandleader and military officer James Reese Europe as the first jazz critic. Welburn writes, "As other writers were practicing the jazz essay, they seemed ignorant of the essence of jazz performed by blacks, missing altogether the

performances of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Jelly Roll Morton, and Duke Ellington. Not until 1933 did a lengthy appreciation of Ellington appear, by Walter Hobson for *Esquire*."[1] Would this have been different had blacks been writing about jazz?

Welburn does cite a handful of black jazz writers: "Although most commentators acknowledged the African American roots of jazz, few African Americans wrote about it with critical depth."[2] He goes on to cite Dave Peyton (for the *Chicago Defender*, 1927–1938) and Lucien White (for the *New York Age*, 1913–1927), both of whom discussed jazz more as a social phenomenon than in purely analytical terms. One exception among Welburn's citations is Frank Marshall Davis, whose examination of jazz recordings was syndicated in the 1930s by the Associated Negro Press. Otherwise, by any measure, white writers have thoroughly dominated the writing of jazz journalism, criticism, and history.

Bob Porter, a white writer, wrote in the preface to his valuable 2016 book *Soul Jazz: Jazz in the Black Community, 1945–1975*, "You can find contemporary jazz history texts with no mention of Buddy Johnson, Illinois Jacquet, Gene Ammons, or Donald Byrd; successful jazz musicians whose popularity drew largely from the black community. And this situation seems likely to continue; there is little variance in the telling of jazz history."[3]

The anthology section of this volume is by no means complete, and it does suggest the need for a more expansive anthology of black writings on jazz. The goal was to represent historic black writings on jazz as well as the contributors to our original *Ain't But a Few of Us* series, including essays that reflect an assortment of viewpoints on jazz from a black perspective, and especially further inquiry into the dearth of African Americans writing on jazz. Also represented are black jazz writing forerunners, including several historic figures, and black musicians who have contributed to the dialogue, the latter culled primarily from the mainstream jazz prints. The goal of our anthology is to present contributions on jazz by black writers from several perspectives, including previews, reviews, recordings reviews, and editorials on the general jazz condition.

notes

1. Ron Welburn, "Jazz Criticism," in *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, edited by Bill Kirchner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 748.

2. Welburn, "Jazz Criticism," 749.

3. Bob Porter, preface to *Soul Jazz: Jazz in the Black Community, 1945–1975* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2016), ix.