



'HELLO CENTRAL'

John Miles reviews

Reference Back: Philip Larkin's Uncollected Jazz Writings 1940-1984,
edited by Richard Palmer and John White, with a foreword by Alan Plater
(University of Hull Press 1999), £19.99, ISBN 0 85958 692 8

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In the jazz section of our music faculty library there are lots of nice clean books. On one of the middle shelves at letter L there is one small volume which is falling to pieces. It is, as you have guessed, Larkin's *All What Jazz*. The same fate of being read and reread until it drops to bits is surely destined to overtake many copies of *Reference Back*, its companion volume. Whereas *All What Jazz* collected Larkin's record reviews, *Reference Back* shows him enjoying himself in similarly forthright fashion reviewing books on jazz. Long overdue but well worth waiting for, it is brought to us now by two editors who know their jazz as well as they know their Larkin. This new book contains 67 previously uncollected items of Larkin's writing, including 48 book reviews which originally appeared in *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *The American Scholar* and other journals. Richard Palmer and John White are both well known for their writings on jazz, as well as for their contributions to the work of the Philip Larkin Society. They have dug through the files of periodicals and they have supplemented published reviews with essays, book reports and letters, including some from the University of Hull's Philip Larkin Collection.. Also included are Larkin's selections for the *Daily Telegraph* Records of the Year from 1961 to 1970. Palmer and White give us an Introduction, Notes and Commentaries, a list of books reviewed and cited and a list of jazz artists cited. Alan Plater's Foreword is no routine guest appearance, but an opening cornet solo with plenty of high notes announcing one of the book's themes: 'this collection goes a long way towards reclaiming Philip from the demonologists.' In *Reference Back* we have the considered views Larkin was prepared to place on public record, and as Palmer and White show in their introduction, these make it more difficult to sustain the generalised charges of sexism and racism sometimes levelled against him.

First and foremost, however, *Reference Back* valuably extends our knowledge of Larkin as a critic. Reviewing books gave him a broader platform than was available in the more restricted format of a record review. His strengths include a sharp discrimination honed by sustained listening, and an ability to conjure up, in very few words, the human and social context in which a particular recording was created. He is particularly successful with the traditional jazz with which he was most at home, though *Reference Back* also contains evidence that he could on occasion spot a winner among post-traditional

performers.

There are two items on Louis Armstrong, one from *The Guardian* in 1971, and one from *The Observer* in 1984. Larkin seems to have had a very special understanding of Armstrong, as he demonstrates in the first of these reviews:

in spite of the world-wide recognition as an international figure, we may still be only on the threshold of understanding his true significance. Of course he was an artist of Flaubertian purity, and a character of exceptional warmth and goodness. But has anyone yet seen him as the Chaucer, say, of the culture of the twenty-first century? While we are wondering whether to integrate with Africa, Armstrong (and Ellington, and Waller, and all the countless others) has done it behind our backs.

A 1966 review of Ed Kirkeby's biography of Fats Waller acutely questions the author's view of Fats as 'a jazz version of Dylan Thomas or Brendan Behan'. The literary comparisons are not, I think, coincidental, and as with Armstrong, there seems to be some sort of elective affinity at work here. Every poet has voices in the background when he writes, and it is not difficult to imagine that in Fats Waller, with his derisive and satirical treatment of mawkish romantic lyrics, Larkin may have found an 'audacious, purifying, elemental' mentor, urging him on with shouts of 'Yeah, tell me more'.

Curiously, though Larkin says all the right things about Ellington, I do not feel quite the same sort of affinity in his writings about this major figure. The entry he wrote on Ellington in Justin Wintle's *Makers of Modern Culture* (1981) is balanced, lucid and valuably informative. But instead of seeming to suggest that Ellington's music could not be played by other performers, Larkin could have done more justice to the technical and interpretative abilities of a younger generation of jazz players who were beginning to have notable achievements to their credit, such as the Alan Cohen Jazz Band's full reconstruction of the *Black, Brown and Beige* suite, or the Prague Classic Jazz Collegium's *Ellingtonia*.

Reference Back enables us to take a fresh look at Larkin's controversial treatment of the debates about traditional and modern jazz:

The jazz historian is usually either a Wells or a Gibbon: either things are growing better and better, or they are getting progressively worse. Since the music seems to be suffering a radical upheaval every twenty years, there is plenty of evidence for either side.

What is notable about this 1967 review of Barry McRae's *The Jazz Cataclysm* is the respect and understanding he shows for McRae's views before he makes clear his own disagreement with them:

This account of jazz in the last twenty years is thorough and readable, backed up with a discography and the advantage of having talked personally to many of the players whose work it describes . . . The unaffected, considered way in which [McRae] writes persuades the reader of the soundness of his position.

Equally notable are Larkin's selections for the *Daily Telegraph* Records of the Year, which reveal him as a far less exclusive traditionalist than might be assumed from some of his statements in *All What Jazz*. His choices of records of Adderley, Mingus, Parker, Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman stand the test of time remarkably well, and they show a quality of judgement which would have been quite impossible for someone with a closed mind.

This new collection gives us a broader view of Larkin's general approach to jazz criticism than could be gathered from his notorious assimilation of Charlie Parker, Picasso and Pound as examples of 'modernism' in his introduction to *All What Jazz*. That insidiously misleading analogy expresses little more than the record collector's besetting vice of substituting antiquarianism for discovery, and Larkin has other things to say which I find far more illuminating. The critic may have had theories, but the poet has more than a hint of a sustaining myth that integrates his jazz experience into his life as a poet. Reviewing Whitney Balliett's *The Sound of Surprise*, Larkin discusses 'The Critic as Hipster':

Wilde's sentence about the relation of the critic to the work of art being precisely that of the artist to the visible world comes irresistibly to mind.

Even more revealing is his review of Charles Delaunay's life of Django Reinhardt, significantly headed 'Lives of the Poets', where he seems more or less explicitly (as in the Waller review quoted above) to draw a parallel between poets and jazzmen:

In a way it has been the jazzman who in this century had led 'the life of the Artist'. At a time when the established arts are generally accepted and subsidised with unenthusiastic reverence, he has had to suffer from prejudice or neglect in order to get the unique emotional language of our age recognised.

I suspect there is a fleeting vision here of Larkin himself, as the big man who does his three years in the state penitentiary and heads north to the windy city to become the blues singer who gives voice to our everyday joys and sorrows. However that may be, he challenges reflection here, about the underlying unity between poetry and jazz, and the relationship between artist and audience.

The editors have produced a wealth of relevant background information without overloading the book. If you count their notes and a wonderfully apt quotation from Baudelaire, their Introduction runs to twenty pages. The case they state is persuasive and well-documented. Their commentary clarifies the context of Larkin's jazz writings and unmistakably draws upon a lifetime's involvement with jazz and a personal knowledge of the man. If it almost goes without saying that Larkin and Alan Plater write superbly, it should also be said that Palmer and White succeed admirably in giving commentary the atmosphere of an engaging conversation. I would have liked a more informative and less allusive title for the book, since its prospective readers are not all insiders who already know the titles of Larkin's poems. Given the general excellence of the documentation, it is surprising that there is no index, though the two appendices go some way towards filling this need.

Reference Back will be invaluable for anyone wanting to know more about jazz, to start a jazz record collection, or to listen to an existing collection with renewed enthusiasm. For readers of Larkin it will be indispensable for the way in which it shows him revealing himself and sometimes recreating himself: devastatingly witty, frank about his prejudices but also more open-minded and compassionate than is sometimes supposed. For anyone who enjoys good writing, and the challenging display of a keen critical intellect, it could well prove to be the book of the year. Jelly Roll Morton's 'Hello Central, give me Dr Jazz' was where many of us began. 'Hello Central, give me Dr White and Dr Palmer' may require an extra intake of breath, but it is the right verdict on a book for all seasons, a classic of a rare and special kind. Pawn the washboard or hock the soprano sax if you have to, but buy it.