

Larkin With Jazz: Reminiscence by Dr. John White

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In January 1965, during my first week as an assistant lecturer in American History at the University of Hull, I wandered into the refectory bar and overheard two men discussing the composition of various jazz rhythm sections. One was an eminent professor of history. The other – balding, bespectacled and soberly suited - was the University's poet-librarian, Philip Larkin, asking "and who was that farting about on drums?" Before arriving in Hull, I'd read *The Whitsun Weddings*, and the poems 'For Sidney Bechet' and 'Reference Back' had struck responsive chords. Too overawed to introduce myself, I retreated to the bookstore and bought a copy of *The Less Deceived*. A few weeks later, I spotted Larkin alone at the bar, and remarked that there had been remarkably few students present at my just-finished lecture. Eying me suspiciously, he said: "Well, they don't want old fogeys like me, and they don't want smart alecks like you."

Years later, I reminded him of the episode. Mortified, in retrospect, at this lapse in his general courtesy, he apologised in a brief note: "Please forget the smart aleck business – it was years ago and very thoughtless thing of me to say. I shouldn't dream of saying it now." He also invited me to join a newly formed university Dining Club that was "all right, but lonely and ladylike. Not enough drinkers."

My friendship with Philip Larkin in Hull was rooted in our mutual love of jazz – although not always the same kinds of jazz. Larkin's jazz heroes and heroines were a restricted group: King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Sidney Bechet, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday and Eddie Condon. (When I gave him a card from Eddie Condon's jazz club in New York City, I received a note thanking me for "a true piece of the Condon cross.") I once told him (rather pompously) that I thought I had more "catholic" jazz tastes. His contemptuous and loud response - delivered in front of passing students in the Brynmor Jones Library - was: "You mean you are one of those buggers who likes everybody!"

I remember an evening spent at Philip's house in Newland Park (there were just the two of us). He had obviously gone to some trouble – in addition to beer and Scotch, there were also sandwiches, cakes and coffee. The session, I felt, was going very happily: Philip's preferred jazzmen blasting from the hi-fi (he was very deaf), shared responses to felicitous phrases, casual, jazz-centred conversation, and trawls through his impressive record collection. Quite suddenly, and a propos of nothing that had gone before, he asked me if I'd ever thought of transposing the decades of a human life into days of the week. I confessed that I hadn't. Philip, not surprisingly, had, and informed me grimly that he was "on" Friday afternoon. With forced cheerfulness, I said that I hoped I was only near Wednesday morning, but he didn't appear to register the remark. Then he said with bleak conviction: "Sometimes, I think the only thing to do is just to sell up everything and wait for the knock on the door." His mood lifted as suddenly as it had appeared. My recollection of the remainder of the evening is of roughly equal proportions of jazz and whiskey, and Philip's intriguing explanation of the hidden meaning of the phrase "porters larking with the mails" in *The Whitsun Weddings*. When I said that Larkinophiles at the University of Texas would pay handsomely for such classified information, he said expansively: "Take it, dear boy!"

Record evenings with Philip and other friends followed a familiar pattern: academic gossip, genuflections to Condon, Goodman, Ellington and Count Basie. Then we would play the

great blues “shouters” – Joe Turner, Jimmy Rushing and Jimmy Witherspoon. In many of his blues performances – usually about advancing age or the loss of his “woman”, Witherspoon interjected a personal note: “When I went to see my baby, she pulled the shades and locked the door/She said ‘Goodbye, Witherspoon, I can’t use your rollin’ no more’ “. Repeated playings of these lines elicited from Larkin the reflection that the sentiments recounted by ‘Spoon always reminded him of one of those “King and Country” films of the 1940s, in which the hero receives a ritual handshake from his superior at the Foreign Office, and the farewell: “Goodbye, Witherspoon, it takes a brave man to go where you’re going.”

Unfortunately, Larkin scholars have given little attention to his writings and insights on jazz. Yet Larkin himself said: “listening to new jazz records for an hour with a pint of gin and tonic is the best remedy for a day’s work that I know.” He “discovered” jazz in the 1930s and it offered him “a unique private excitement.” This “excitement” was both “private” and “shared” – initially with his friend Jim Sutton, in Coventry, where they took turns to “wind the portable HMV” gramophone, and listened to “those white and coloured Americans, Bubber Miley, Frank Teschmacher, J. C. Higginbotham [who] spoke immediately to our understanding. Their rips, slurs and distortions were something we understood perfectly, something we had found for ourselves, that wasn’t taught at school.” Once planted, the jazz seed flourished. At Oxford with Kingsley Amis and other kindred spirits “jazz became part of the private joke of existence, rather than a public expertise; expressions such as ‘combined pimp and lover’ and ‘eating the cheaper cuts of pork’ (both from a glossary on Yellow Dog Blues) flecked our conversation cryptically.”

Larkin’s passion for jazz is evident in his correspondence. Writing to his friend Jim Sutton in 1941 about the soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet, Larkin enthused:

“I rushed out on Monday and bought Nobody Knows the Way I Feel This Morning. Fucking, cuntin’g, bloody good! Bechet is a great artist. As soon as he starts playing you automatically stop thinking about anything else and listen. Power and glory!”

Writing to his friend Norman Illes in 1963, Larkin asked:

“Do you remember burbling ‘My wife revolves a barrel’ against Armstrong’s Body and Soul in Kingsley’s room? This was your mishearing of ‘My life revolves around her’.”

Richard Palmer has written that: “Most literary critics who have tackled Larkin freely (on occasion almost proudly) admit their lack of interest in jazz or their incapacity to judge Larkin’s writings on the subject.” And, as Trevor Tolley has remarked, if Larkin, like, say, John Betjeman, had written about architecture, “his views would be discussed without any condescension to the reader, whose lack of knowledge would be regarded as ignorance.”

Tolley argues forcefully that the “continued insistence of Larkin’s writings about jazz – an insistence of main importance coming from a writer of his stature – is that jazz is not only a major cultural phenomenon of our time, but an art that is to be taken as seriously as any other.”

This evening, I want to consider (briefly) some of Larkin’s reflections on jazz recordings and jazz writers. They are, by turns, funny, perceptive and provocative. If they don’t produce any converts to jazz, at least the heathen can enjoy the prose.

All What Jazz (without a question mark) is collection of Larkin's record reviews for the *Daily Telegraph* from 1961 to 1971. It is a book perhaps more talked about than read – apart from the (in) famous introspective introduction with its apparent rejection of “Parker, Pound and Picasso” and modernism in the arts in general. Adopting the (palpably false) persona of the embarrassed and unqualified jazz record reviewer, Larkin states:

“I hadn't really any intention of being a jazz critic. In literature, I understood, there were several old whores who had grown old in the reviewing game by praising everything, and I planned to be their jazz equivalent. [My] readers deserved to be told the best of all worlds, and I was the man to do it. It didn't really matter, therefore, whether I liked things at first or not, as I was going to call them all masterpieces.”

But he also “confessed” that, in the event, he had tried “to be fair and conscientious” in writing the *Daily Telegraph* pieces.

There was many a time when I substituted ‘challenging’ for ‘insolent,’ ‘adventurous’ for ‘excruciating’ and ‘colourful’ for ‘viciously absurd’ in a thoroughly professional manner.

My copy of the first edition of *AWJ* is inscribed: “To John – from his illiterate (jazz-wise) foot stomping colleague, Philip.” As the second edition was about to appear, I was teaching at the University of Alabama. Philip wrote:

“I'll save a copy for you. In fact, it should be out in the USA about the same time, so better keep quiet that you know me. It now reads very anti-black, insofar as most of the people I ballock are black – (John) Coltrane, (Ornette) Coleman, (Archie) Shepp. But then most of the people I praise are black too. Better play safe.”

He was very pleased when I sent him American reviews of the book.

One, by the British-born critic, Stanley Dance, received the reply: “No Laureateship – thanks for the Dance. I could tell he agreed with every word I said, but daren't say so.”

Clive James has said of *AWJ*: “no wittier book of jazz criticism has ever been written.” But cautions, “wits rarely tell jokes. Larkin's prose flatters the reader by giving him as much as he can take in at one time.” As one example, James quotes Larkin's description of his bete noir, John Coltrane as “the master of the thinly disagreeable who sounds as if he's playing for an audience of cobras.” When he discovered that the great blues singer Jimmy Rushing had said of Coltrane: “I don't think he can play his instrument,” Larkin gleefully added that: “This accords very well with my own personal opinion that Coltrane sounds like nothing so much as a club bore who has been metamorphosed by a fellow-member of magical powers into a pair of bagpipes.” James then adds parenthetically: “Note Larkin's comic timing: a less witty writer would have put ‘metamorphosed into a pair of bagpipes by a fellow-member of magical powers,’ and so halved the effect.”

Larkin himself advised Faber & Faber, the publishers of *AWJ*, to market it as a “freak publication” and to “treat it like a book by T. S. Eliot on all-in wrestling.”

Here are some other examples of Larkin's wit from *AWJ* (and *Required Writing*).

On his “readers”:

Sometimes I imagine them, sullen fleshy inarticulate men, stockbrokers, sellers of goods, living in 30-year-old detached houses among the golf courses of outer London, husbands of ageing and bitter wives they first seduced to Artie Shaw’s *Begin the Beguine*, fathers of cold-eyed lascivious daughters on the pill, to whom Ramsay Macdonald is coeval with Rameses II.

“Cool Britannia” (1961)

Not so long ago, the unlikelihood of the Briton as jazzman would have been perfectly expressed by thinking of him in a bowler hat. Result: complete incongruity – like Mrs. Grundy dancing the can-can. Yet today the bowler hat is worn with jolly unselfconsciousness by some of this country’s most popular groups as part of their stand uniform. Nobody laughs. In fact, they cheer. British jazz has arrived – in Britain at any rate.

“Minority Interest” (1971)

When, in search of Christmas presents (that annual conversion of one’s indifference to others into active hatred), I wandered into a few ‘record departments,’ I was shocked to see how little of the stock therein could be called jazz.

Rank on rank of shiny LP covers depicted the same thing: a bunch of young people, mostly male, with clothes and faces appropriate to criminal vagrancy, stood scowling at me in attitudes eloquent of ‘We’re gonna do you, Dad.’ Their names, so far from implying any national, familial or artistic kinship, were phrases or even single words chosen at random in a kind of imagist or even surreal poetry – *The Light Brigade*, *Deuteronomy*, *Lace*, *Pale Ways*, *The Low Foreheads*. Christmas always upsets me.

Larkin’s love of jazz was shared most notably with Kingsley Amis from their time at Oxford. Jazz references pepper their published correspondence, although Amis pretended to be unimpressed by Larkin the fledgling jazz journalist, and told him in 1957: “I advise you to stop writing on jazz; stick to bum.”

Yet jazz made him happy and (suspend disbelief) glad to be alive. He once famously declared:

A. E. Houseman said he could recognise poetry because it made his throat tighten and his eyes water: I can recognise jazz because it makes me tap my foot, grunt affirmative exhortations, or even get up and caper ‘round the room.

I have a vivid memory of a partially inebriated Larkin executing all three of these signs of approval at my house in Hull – usually during an extended performance by Eddie Condon and His All Stars – of the intriguingly titled: “How Come You Do Me Like You Do?”

In an unpublished piece (discovered by Richard Palmer) “Lines Written on Louis Armstrong’s Death,” Larkin reflected:

I was born the day after Louis received that telegram from King Oliver summoning him to Chicago, and like most of my contemporaries as soon as I was old enough to wind up a gramophone I was sold on his music. *West End Blues*, *Dallas Blues*, *St. Louis Blues*, all of them took hold of my mind like poems, or better than poems, for you were taught those in school, and I had found this wonderful music for myself.

I'll close this first half with a recording of Larkin reading "For Sidney Bechet." In *Required Writing*, Larkin offered some ambivalent thoughts on whether a poet should be pleased to have another person read or record his/her own work.

The case against:

He will not read it with the emphases that I should use, and this will irritate me. Or he will have the kind of voice I associate with brown-eyed young men called Frank. Or, if the reader is a lady, she may use that tone so popular among her kind which indicates in the very act of enunciation she has perceived in the poem an unbelievably obscene acrostic. None of this seems to me an advantage.

But if an author reads his own poem, it "too often commits one for ever after to reading the poem as if it were one of the sections of the Sale and Movement of Poultry (Domestic) Act, 1943." In the end, Larkin gave a cautious approval to the poet as performer: There comes a moment with any poem that we have really taken to ourselves when we want to hear its author read it.

(Tape recording played)

Part II

In unearthing and editing the fugitive pieces which first appeared as *Reference Back: Philip Larkin's Uncollected Jazz Writings 1940-84*, and most recently, as *Larkin: Jazz Writings*, Richard Palmer and I felt that we were adding a significant item to his literacy legacy. As we state in our Introduction, these sixty-seven pieces (with a Foreword by Alan Plater) fulfil the mandate announced in *Required Writing* that a book reviewer should combine "the knowledge of the scholar with the judgment and cogency of the critic and the readability of the journalist."

Here are a few of his 'jazz journalistic' reflections.

Review of George Melly's autobiographical *Owning Up*:

I could never watch (the verb is chosen advisedly) George Melly singing without feeling embarrassed, and the same goes for reading this book. He is so anxious to tell you which birds he had it off with, what character's armpits smelled like the hallway of a cat-infested slum, and who peed in a washbowl where someone else had left a lettuce to soak that, free speech or not, one soon wishes he would belt up. It's not so much an adolescent desire to shock (though that element is there) as an adolescent sense of humour. On page 37 he dismisses one of his cast as 'over fond of the idea that eight pints of beer and a loud fart were insignia of a free spirit,' seemingly unaware that a similar two-barrelled sentence, differently loaded, perhaps, could be turned on himself. Four-letter words pop like crackers on Guy Fawkes' night.

Review of *Fourteen Miles on a Clear Night* by Peter Gammond and Peter Clayton:

Some five years ago I made a plea for a belle-lettriste of jazz, who could chat amiably about the music without feeling they had to do the up-the-river-from New-Orleans stuff every time they opened a typewriter. Now Messrs Gammond and Clayton have the same idea, claiming that they have written the equivalent of

'Rambles Round My Shelves' and other examples of pleasant literary waffle, as they call it. Is this what I meant?

Far from it. The prevailing tone is one of unrelenting facetiousness, e.g. (of 'Squaty Roo'): 'Squaty from the Old French *esquatir*, meaning to flatten, and Roo from an old English book called 'Winnie-the-Pooh,' meaning a small kangaroo. Very curious really, because at first hearing the music does not suggest this at all – nor at any subsequent hearings for that matter.' Now if anybody finds that funny, they had better rush off with their twenty-five bob to the nearest bookseller, because this is their book: it is nearly all like that.

As Alan Plater writes, Larkin, "as a critic was big enough to change his mind, but also smart enough to sniff the crap at a hundred paces, especially when it was on the page. He is deeply intolerant of flabby prose and socio/econo/historical babble masquerading as thought." That point is well illustrated in his review of Burnett James's *Essays on Jazz*:

Mr James is a shocking writer. He is facetious ('On Swinging Bach' begins: 'I do not, of course, refer to submitting [he means subjecting] Johann Sebastian Bach to capital punishment'). He is intolerably long-winded ('I do not advocate...Still less do I contend...Let us put this in a different way...'). He cannot resist dragging in culture-references ('Lester Young's mind possessed an almost Hazlitt-like sharpness'), and these are not always of the happiest ('Every reader knows that Wordsworth only stood revealed as one of the half-dozen or so greatest poets ever born of woman when he forgot his clever notions').

Whitney Balliett, the *New Yorker's* jazz critic, and a Cornell graduate in English, earned Larkin's (partial) seal of approval, certainly as a prose stylist. Quoting Balliett's statement that "It's a compliment to jazz that nine-tenths of the voluminous writing about it is so bad," Larkin noted: "it is a compliment he himself withholds."

He belongs to the reportage school of criticism, in which at least half the writer's talent goes into making you hear or see the cricket, the boxing, the jazz. Here, for instance is [drummer] Gene Krupa:

When he played, his hair fell over his eyes; he chewed gum; he hunched over his drums or reared back, his arms straight in the air, like a politician at a rally; he sweated; in his climactic moments he converted his arms and hands and drumsticks into sculpted blurs.

Fair enough, you think. But what about what he is actually doing?

He might start with rapidly swelling and subsiding rolls on the snare (accented here and there on the rims), break into an irregular pattern of rimshots mixed with tomtom beats, press into an even, multi-stroked roll; pass his way with greater and greater speed through half a dozen rudiments, and close with staccato rimshots. He didn't bother to adjust his volume and he rarely paused, not realising that silences in drum breaks are twice as stunning as a mounting roar.

[Larkin]: If anyone thinks he can produce a better description of a Krupa drum solo than that, he is welcome to try. The prose, it will be noticed, is literate without being literary: Balliett is at home with the technical term ("rudiments") as well as with the sharp image ("like a politician at a rally") but he keeps these things in hand, subordinate to the job of saying what the music was like.

But Larkin was also suspicious of Balliett's "catholic" enthusiasms: "This is probably the only charge that can be levelled against him: he has no blind spots. As Arnold Bennett said of Eddie Marsh, he's a miserable fellow, he enjoys everything."

Like Balliett, Larkin was able to paint miniature "sound-portraits" of the musicians he loved. Here is Larkin's vivid evocation of Sidney Bechet's performance of "Blue Horizon":

Six choruses of slow blues in which Bechet climbs without interruption or hurry from lower to upper register, his clarinet tone at first thick and throbbing, then soaring like Melba in an extraordinary blend of lyricism and power that constituted the unique Bechet voice, commanding attention the instant it sounded. [Tape]

In one of his record reviews, Larkin wrote:

While an exciting multi-layered sandwich works slowly down the spindle of my record player, I realise afresh the truth of Baudelaire's words: 'Man can live a week without bread, but not a day without the righteous jazz.'

But when I visited him in hospital in what was to prove his final illness, he refused my offer of jazz cassettes to play in his room, and was doubtful if he would want to play jazz records when (and if) he returned home. I assured him that his need for jazz would return and, for a brief time after his discharge from hospital, it seemed to. I saw him in the university bar, seemingly much better, and certainly willing to talk about the recent demise of several noted jazzmen. I gave him a cassette recording of a radio programme celebrating the work of two jazz drummers, Jo Jones and Philly Jo Jones, who had died in the same week. The first was a Larkin favourite; the second, a member of the 'modernist' school he sometimes 'pretended' to like for the benefit of Daily Telegraph readers. He promised to listen to both tributes, and possibly did, but went back into hospital for the last time before I was able to ask for his verdicts.

A distinguished jazz ensemble performed at Philip's Memorial Service in Westminster Abbey on 14 February 1986. The moving recreations of his favourite tunes – 'Blue Horizon' (Bechet), 'Davenport Blues' (Beiderbecke) and trumpeter Alan Elsdon's plangent solo rendition of 'A Closer Walk with Thee' – impressed the large congregation of friends and admirers. Of all the many tributes to his life and work, these were the most fitting and sadly appropriate – and surely more to his liking than the prayers and recitations of his poems up at the "holy end" of the Abbey. I thought of his generosity – a request to borrow a record from his collection saw Philip pull out a large pocket-handkerchief, and solemnly tie a large knot. The desired album was usually ready for collection at his office the next day; the inscription in my copy of *Required Writing* (1983) - "From 'Slow Drag' Larkin" - and the poem "Reference Back."

[Tape plus "Riverside Blues"]

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