

Whose Music Is It, Anyway?

Gene Lees is very worried about what he calls 'black xenophobia in jazz.'

CATS OF ANY COLOR

Jazz Black and White.

By Gene Lees.

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By Paul Thomas

LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S statement "It's no crime for cats of any color to get together and blow" provides Gene Lees with an agenda as well as a title. Mr. Lees shares Armstrong's defensiveness. Playing together may not be criminal, but it has been punished frequently enough. The 10 essays in "Cats of Any Color" contain many vividly rendered interviews and vignettes illustrating that jazz in practice has long been plagued by the very racism some people think it could (and should) obliterate. Mr. Lees was once the editor of *Down Beat*, a journal that has long insisted that jazz is of exemplary cultural significance because it is color-blind and knows no racial barriers; however, he acknowledges that the magazine once had an owner who tried to keep the faces of black musicians off its covers.

Mr. Lees's anecdotes about racism in jazz still have the capacity to shock. In the case of pianists alone, we read about the 10-year-old Horace Silver watching Jimmie Lunceford's band through wooden slats surrounding an open-air whites-only dance pavilion in Connecticut; about Dave Brubeck (who is part Modoc Indian) canceling concert dates in the South during the

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1950's rather than replacing his black bass player, Eugene Wright; about Oscar Peterson's encounter with a barber who refused to cut his hair; about Nat Cole having to send for room service in a hotel in Louisville, Ky., in order to be able to eat lunch with Mr. Lees. The list goes on.

Where, though, does it lead? The argument of "Cats of Any Color" emerges only in its last essay, "Jazz Black and White." This is an attack on what Mr. Lees calls a present-day "black xenophobia in jazz" that he thinks bids fair to install reverse racism within jazz as an art form. His argument is overdrawn and prickly. White band leaders of the 30's, he says, "are accused of stealing the music" because they hired black arrangers. Mr. Lees petulantly adds that "they would be accused of racism if they had not." He does not entertain the possibility that they might have been guilty of both.

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Even if he has a point — it is arguable that no one should be proprietary about music — he obliterates it through his overstatement and polemic. "How anyone can think that the art of Louis Armstrong — or Benny Carter or Count Basie or Coleman Hawkins or John Coltrane — is the cry of pain of a downtrodden people is beyond me," Mr. Lees writes, as though it had seriously been claimed that jazz was nothing *but* a cry of pain.

Mr. Lees's fusillades are scattershot and ad hominem. The trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis is unforgiven for having remarked on television that black jazz musicians have been held back because the music business is controlled by "people who read the Torah and stuff." It is one thing for Mr. Lees not to let this remark go — he says that it "escaped general notice" — but it is another thing for him to use this admittedly reprehensible statement as a hook on which

to hang his potshots against Mr. Marsalis's musical abilities. Soon enough Mr. Lees is firing broadsides of his own, attacking Mr. Marsalis not only for his programming at Lincoln Center, where he is artistic director of the jazz program, but also for his musicianship. "Marsalis," sniffs Mr. Lees, "has never produced anything as melodic as any eight bars of Jerome Kern — or George Gershwin or Harold Arlen." But this unfocused accusation fails to compare like with like — Arlen, Gershwin and Kern are not normally thought of as performers. And it overlooks the "Standard Time" albums, on which Mr. Marsalis plays Arlen, Gershwin, Kern and others — too literally, perhaps, but in a hauntingly beautiful manner all the same.

Mr. Lees observes that today, "in an increasingly academic jazz world, what remains is a kind of hot-house jazz dwelling on the past, supported artificially by grants . . . and programs to 'save' jazz." He acknowledges efforts at reclamation of previously obscure music, but misprizes the character of these efforts. Jazz today is becoming revitalized as well as institutionalized and incorporated; major corporations don't support dying arts. Music produced in a vanishing world of smoky clubs and scratchy records is being reclaimed under the aegis of foundation sponsorship and tax-free corporate support. The drummer Max Roach has received a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award; Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman and George Russell have been similarly — and rightly — honored. Wynton Marsalis has been given the power by Lincoln Center to hire and fire musicians by the score. Maybe this last development could, as Mr. Lees fears, provide a new toehold for reverse racism (though all the evidence is not yet in); but if Mr. Lees would prefer a world where none of this reclamation had happened, he is whistling in the dark. □