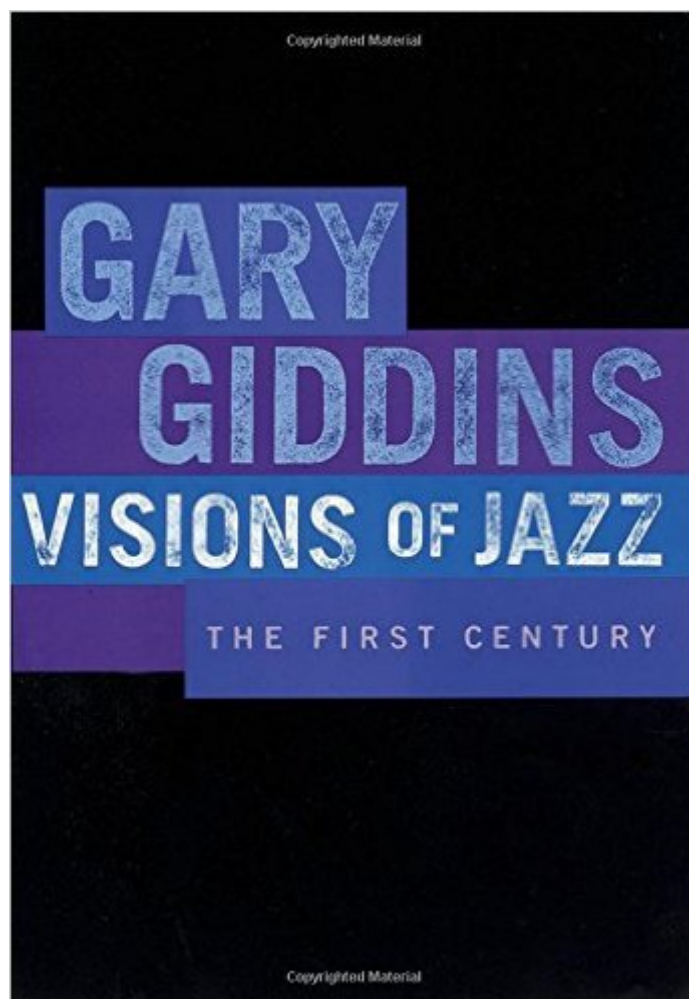


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Visions Of Jazz: The First Century



Synopsis

Poised to become a classic of jazz literature, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* offers seventy-nine chapters illuminating the lives of virtually all the major figures in jazz history. From Louis Armstrong's renegade-style trumpet playing to Sarah Vaughan's operatic crooning, and from the swinging elegance of Duke Ellington to the pioneering experiments of Ornette Coleman, jazz critic Gary Giddins continually astonishes the reader with his unparalleled insight. Writing with the grace and wit that have endeared his prose to *Village Voice* readers for decades, Giddins also widens the scope of jazz to include such crucial American musicians as Irving Berlin, Rosemary Clooney, and Frank Sinatra, all primarily pop performers who are often dismissed by fans and critics as mere derivatives of the true jazz idiom. And he devotes an entire quarter of this landmark volume to young, still-active jazz artists, boldly expanding the horizons of jazz--and charting and exploring the music's influences as no other book has done.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Gary Giddins has performed a remarkable feat. He has covered one hundred years of jazz history in one volume. At 700 pages it is big for sure but it is well researched and very readable. At first glance it appears that Giddins has structured and organized the book in the worst possible way by having one chapter on each of the seminal figures of jazz history, and in semi chronological order. The pitfall here is that it lends itself to a book that looks like lots of note cards strung together. This structure can also obscure the larger picture; jazz is not just the history of a bunch of individuals.

Giddins very skillfully avoids both of these traps. Each chapter is well researched, filled with anecdotes about the musician or group, and through the chapters flows the larger background of the historic movements and issues in the development of jazz. Giddins also approaches jazz with a refreshing "inclusiveness" and wastes precious little energy in defining what jazz is or in dismissing various movements as "unpure" or other such nonsense. In fact he makes the point right up front that jazz owes as much to popular music for its genesis as it does to spirituals or black folk music. In the chapter on Irving Berlin he points out that Tin Pan Alley was a mixture of black, Jewish and other ethnic blends of music, and in fact, Berlin was even accused of having an underground railroad of black song writers in his back room that he was ghosting for. And this, at the time, was not meant as a compliment..Of course, jazz cannot be discussed in a vacuum and race plays an important part in its history. Giddins adds two bits of trivia, which I find speak volumes in themselves about where we are and where we have come from.

Gary Giddins was only a name to me until Ken Burns's JAZZ series aired on PBS in early 2001. While I appreciated all the commentators in that remarkable series, it was the observations of Giddins that I began to eagerly anticipate night after night. He made me SEE music that I knew and loved but whose structure and complexity I had often been unable to grasp. Despite some jazz appreciation classes in college and haphazard collecting of old jazz records over the years, I had not gotten much past the "I know what I like" phase. His passion for music I was less familiar with led me on some rewarding treasure hunts. I bought "Visions of Jazz" shortly after the conclusion of the Burns miniseries. I devoured it. I have turned to it time and again in the intervening years. Many critics overanalyze their subjects to the point where they suck the life out of the very thing they're attempting to illuminate. Giddins does not have that problem. His prose sings and swings with the elan of his beloved Sarah Vaughan. Giddins's re-examination of the music of Ellington and Armstrong may seem at first blush to be superfluous; you may think you know all there is to know on that subject. But he proves that even the most accessible jazz figures and their music evolve from and operate within a such a complex idiom that periodic re-evaluation is necessary, and, if approached with respect for both the subject and the reader -- which Giddins has above all else -- it is most welcome indeed. There are chapters in "Visions of Jazz" about musicians with whom I was completely unfamiliar. But I took a chance and read them, and wound up buying some Matthew Shipp recordings. It's that kind of book. You can take out as much as you put in.

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