

***Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology*, Richard James Burgess, John Edward Hasse, and Daniel E. Sheehy, producers. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW CD 40820, 2010. 6-CD set with 200-page book, notes by thirty authors, \$108.00.**

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The saxophonist John Zorn once quipped that jazz musicians “don’t think in terms of boxes.”<sup>1</sup> While it may be true that the most creative of jazz innovators have drawn on a range of influences, anyone who has taught a jazz survey knows that small boxes (swing, bebop, cool, free) can be immensely helpful in introducing this ever-adapting music to students. Containers of a larger sort, of course, inform any anthology of scores or recordings. Until now the most prominent container to define the history of jazz—for students and aficionados alike—was *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz (SCCJ)*. This monumental box set was first issued on five LPs in 1973, and it traced a history of jazz from 1916 (Scott Joplin’s piano roll of *Maple Leaf Rag*) to 1966 (Cecil Taylor’s *Enter Evening*) through the eyes of a single compiler, Martin Williams. Despite receiving some minor updates in 1987 when it was reissued on five CDs, this collection helped to create—for better or worse—a remarkably stable canon of jazz players, pieces, and recordings. Textbooks began to tie their musical examples to Williams’s selections, instructors centered courses around the anthology, and for many of us it was Williams’s ears and insights that came to form the box bounding the semi-official history of America’s improvised “classical” music.

In many ways this state of affairs was pleasant enough. Williams gave special attention to a number of important players (his original anthology happily dwelled on Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk). He provided multiple takes of several tunes (which allowed for close comparison in this performers’ art), and his liner notes told a powerful story about the (mostly) African-American men who created this music. In other ways, however, Williams’s collection fell short. By

1. John Zorn in Bill Milkowski, “John Zorn: One Future, Two Views,” *Jazz Times* (March 2000), <http://jazztimes.com/articles/20521-john-zorn-one-future-two-views>.

focusing so forcefully on a handful of innovative soloists, Williams missed a great deal of stylistic diversity. With the exception of some mighty singers, women were largely absent, as were non-black Americans, fusions with popular styles, and small solo or collaborative works. There have been loud calls to update the *SCCJ* ever since it went out of print in 1997. Rather than simply add the last quarter century of creative and scholarly work, however, the Smithsonian has undertaken the construction of an entirely new box. The result is *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology*.

There is much to admire about this new collection, but it is difficult to praise it without comparison to its predecessor. First there are the recordings themselves. In its first edition the *SCCJ* was woefully marred by some miserable LP transfers. Almost as bad, tracks were often truncated to focus attention on favored soloists. While some of these problems were corrected in the collection's 1997 remastering, the six CDs that compose the new anthology are a huge step forward in aural experience. These 111 tracks are exquisitely remastered and contain almost entirely complete recordings. Quite simply, this collection happily allows the music to speak for itself while providing a truly magnificent sonic experience. The quality of the recordings, coupled with a beautifully produced booklet, easily justify the \$108 price tag. (To be perfectly honest, "booklet" is too weak a word. This 200-page reference work contains not only brief essays on each piece, but also detailed discographic information and period photographs for almost every track. Thankfully, it is also bound to lay flat.)

In addition to sounding quite different, the two collections vary considerably in their contents. Williams had worked to select recordings that showed a stylistic development from ragtime and the blues to free jazz. Along the way he lingered on favored artists. The 1987 revision, for example, included a string of eight Ellington recordings: *East St. Louis Toodle-Oo*, *The New East St. Louis Toodle-Oo*, *Diminuendo in Blue/Crescendo in Blue*, *Ko-Ko*, *Concerto for Cootie*, *Cotton Tail*, *In a Mellotone*, and *Blue Serge*. All but the first of these pieces was recorded between 1937 and 1941, a period during which Williams clearly found Ellington at the height of his powers. This assessment—in large part because of the *SCCJ*'s success—has become conventional wisdom. Despite its increased length, *Jazz* lingers much less, and it contains just four Ellington recordings: *Black and Tan Fantasy*, *Ko-Ko*, *Cotton Tail* (with Ella Fitzgerald), and *Isfahan*. This change not only helps to reduce Ellington's dominance, but as the tracks are now spread between 1927 and 1966, they better show the breadth and development of his skills.

The editors of the new collection also decided to follow a fairly strict chronological approach rather than placing similar tracks together as Williams had done. This change will make teaching the boxes of jazz considerably more difficult, but that may be a good thing as it better exposes the

music's surprisingly untidy history. When I first listened to the collection from beginning to end, I was pleasantly surprised to hear The Chico Hamilton Quintet, The Lucky Thompson Trio, Sonny Rollins, Sun Ra and his Arkestra, and Nat "King" Cole and his Trio back-to-back, thanks to a single year: 1956. In short, *Jazz* tells a radically new story. Its contents overlap only slightly with the *SCCJ*, and it arranges musical material to highlight stylistic diversity rather than force a sense of historical continuity.

The breadth indicated by the Ellington selections is mirrored in the new collection as a whole. Whereas the *SCCJ* reflected the tastes and biases of a single compiler, the contents of *Jazz* were selected by consulting some fifty educators, authors, broadcasters, and performers. Final decisions were made not by one listener, but by a committee of five (David Baker, José Bowen, John Edward Hasse, Dan Morgenstern, and Alyn Shipton). The new collection is much more inclusive as a result. Students and teachers alike will be delighted to find a much better representation of women, including artists like the Boswell Sisters, Mary Lou Williams, and Toshiko Akiyoshi. The music's reach outside the United States is also made much clearer with selections from Irakere (Cuba), Abdullah Ibrahim (South Africa), and Nguyễn Lê (French-Vietnamese). Most happily for this listener's ears, the new anthology better recognizes jazz's connections to music beyond ragtime and the blues with Bunk's Brass Band (New Orleans), Tito Puente (Afro-Cuban), Masada (Jewish New York), and Medeski, Martin & Wood (jam/rock). Finally, the box defining jazz is now allowed to slip (if only slightly) into the twenty-first century, with a final selection from 2003: the Polish trumpeter Tomasz Stańko's *Suspended Night Variation VIII*.

Despite these improvements, as an educational tool *Jazz* does have its shortcomings. By their very nature anthologies are always incomplete. This one may have successfully expanded the box, but its holes are still significant. First, the anthology is, of course, already a decade out of date, and it scurries perhaps too quickly past fusions between jazz and more popular styles. Second, without the multiple takes that Williams had selected, the new collection makes it much more difficult to demonstrate the intricacies of improvisation. Most importantly, while Williams had endeavored to tell a unified history in his liner notes, the short essays that accompany each piece in *Jazz* were written by some thirty different authors, ranging from scholars to performers and from educators to journalists. While this sort of approach allows us to hear many different voices, there seems to have been little effort made at unifying these essays, and together they vary considerably in style, content, and quality. Some reflect on the mechanics of a recording session, while others examine issues of racial or musical content. Only a handful draw connections between multiple pieces, and many seem to be little more than efforts to justify an artist's place within this new canon. In short, Williams's collection may

have been limited, but it told its story in some detail. The new anthology casts a wider net, but does so with somewhat less coherence.

The new Smithsonian anthology may well come to represent a new box for jazz history, and a beautiful box it is. That said, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the continued value of such boxes. When the *SCCJ* was first released in 1973, it was welcomed in large part because it brought together a body of recordings, many of which had become quite difficult to obtain. Today, however, almost all of the material on *Jazz* is easily acquired in a well-stocked library or through Internet downloads. The educational value of such compilations is, as a result, considerably less clear. I doubt I will ever require students to purchase *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology*, as there are cheaper ways to make these materials available. The new collection will, however, now be my first answer when a student asks, "Where can I find more recordings, photographs, or information?" Perhaps the Smithsonian will come to see the new anthology not as a completed work, but as a jumping off spot for bigger projects. In his Foreword to the 1997 remastering of the *SCCJ*, Bruce Talbot recognized the collection's shortcomings and suggested that they were best dealt with "through recent and future Smithsonian jazz collections." *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology* is (to borrow from a track present on the collection) a giant step in the right direction. The Smithsonian has already launched an educational website, <http://www.folkways.si.edu/jazz/mixer.aspx>, to accompany the anthology. Perhaps the work of better explaining and expanding the jazz canon can continue there. Whatever the case, the boxes represented by these two collections are quite different, and the new anthology clearly offers some welcome additions to the story of jazz.