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Book Review of Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination

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Book Review of *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination* by Brent Hayes Edwards by James Altman

Abstract: this book review examines Brent Hayes Edwards's *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination*, and the insightful conclusions he draws from the, largely, unexplored links between jazz and literature.

Keywords: Jazz, black diaspora, literature, interplay, mythos, Brent Hayes Edwards

Brent Hayes Edwards is a noted scholar of numerous aspects of the black diasporic experience. In *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination*, he examines the often overlooked interplay between the emerging jazz music of the Harlem Renaissance, and, what we might think of as, the more conventional "literature" both preceding and following it. That is the crux of Edwards's scholarly mission. He seeks to demystify the origins of jazz by showing that its history is just as rich and varied as that of any other literary form. He does not do this because he feels the need to "justify" the history of jazz by connecting it to some more "acceptable" literary genre. Instead, this study seeks to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the many literary and musical forms which melded to produce jazz, and which continue to influence popular culture today.

Formally speaking, the book is divided into eight chapters. Each chapter, ostensibly, focuses on either a great figure in jazz, like Louis Armstrong, or some aspect of music construction, like the, sometimes multifaceted, meanings of song titles. Practically speaking, however, insights and observations ebb and flow, freely between chapters like an improvised jazz tune. At every turn, new, unexpected, connections between prose, poetry, and jazz, appear. From the more familiarly styled literary introductions of James Weldon Johnson to Neil Armstrong's first words on the moon, *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination* draws

together not only the myriad threads of the African-American experience, but provides much useful insight on some of its perspective on wider American popular culture through the decades.

Taking *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination* as mirroring less a single jazz tune, and more an entire, multi-artist, concert extravaganza, the book's structure makes even more sense, and its mission becomes that much clearer. The "headliners" each take center stage for a while and then yield to someone else. Their individual accomplishments, and the myths surrounding them, are examined in such engaging terms, that readers will become just as eager as is Edwards, himself, to understand why, for instance, it is so important to the legend of Louis Armstrong that his use of Scat singing arose from "an accident" even though many who were present at the supposed incident claim that was not the case? Readers also will be given much food for thought as to how that speaks to what factors help to shape any sort of popular culture, race notwithstanding.

Like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington receives top billing in the "concert" that is *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination*. His musical and literary beginnings are expertly chronicled. While some of this may be well known, what may be quite a bit less so is the prodigious amount of, more conventional, poetry and prose he wrote, and how throughout his life he constantly converted prose to poetry and back again, and tried to infuse jazz into other areas of music, and vice versa. It may surprise many readers to find just how much of a distinction Duke Ellington drew between the jazz being played in Harlem, and that being played in New Orleans, and in just how much higher esteem he held the former.

Other, perhaps less well known, artists also populate the pages of *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination*. For example, Mary Lou Williams, and her technique of "zoning" in order to produce her best music may not automatically resonate with readers until Edwards

makes the point that many athletes and entertainers now “get in the zone” in order to achieve optimum results. Singer songwriters Henry Threadgill and Nathaniel Mackey also receive relatively brief, but riveting, examination. Through close reading of their song titles and lyrics Edwards reveals their influence on more widely popular artists like Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. Their impact on contemporary hip-hop and rap artists is also explored, as is the notion that many who acknowledge their impact do so only through anecdotes shrouded in myth and legend.

Those interested in the journey of jazz, from where it has been, to where it is, to where it is going, will find *Epistrophies Jazz and the Literary Imagination* an eye-opening pleasure to read. Those interested in the wider impact of music upon generations of popular culture will also find the book enlightening.