

Putting the White Man In Charge

Because Negroes invented jazz, and because the very best players have so often been Negroes, the art has always been a junction for color trouble in the world of evaluation and promotion. By the end of the '20s, Duke Ellington was trying to get his buddies to call their art "Negro music," possibly because Paul Whiteman had been dubbed "King of Jazz." Variations on this phenomenon have risen and fallen throughout the history of the art.

Since the '60s, however, certain Negroes who cannot play will claim to be of aesthetic significance on the basis of sociology and some irrelevant ancestral connection to Africa—which provided only part of the mix that became jazz. That had an ironic impact because we are now back to the Paul Whiteman phenomenon, as if all of those white people who had to put up with black nonsense now have their chance to express their rage. This time white musicians who can play are too frequently elevated far beyond their abilities in order to allow white writers to make themselves feel more comfortable about being in the role of evaluating an art from which they feel substantially alienated. Now, having long been devoted to creating an establishment based on "rebellion," or what Rimbaud called the "love of sacrilege," they have achieved a moment long desired: Now certain kinds of white men can focus their rebellion on the Negro. Oh, happy day.

In his essential *Blues Up and Down* (St. Martin's), Tom Piazza pulled the covers off of these men when he wrote, "Many jazz reviewers—especially among the generation that grew up in the 1960s and '70s—suffer from intense inferiority feelings in front of the musicians they write about. This results in a vacillation between an exaggerated heroworship of musicians and an exaggerated sense of betrayal when the musicians don't meet their needs." Piazza surely knew what he was talking about, especially since he was a white man who had been among these jazz writers when

nobody dark was around, which allowed him to understand them and their various insecurities and their various resentments close up.

In Francis Davis' *Like Young: Jazz, Pop, Youth and Middle Age* (DaCapo), one can get a good deal of insight into Piazza's thesis. It is a classic of its kind. Davis unintentionally makes it clear that he is intimidated by Negroes and also quite jealous of them. The intimidation arrives because of the troubles and the fun he imagines Negroes having when he is not around. The resentment flares if these Negroes have any power to define themselves and what they are doing or if they have reputations independent of Davis' permission or if they cannot be conventionally condescended to from the abolitionist's perspective that so many jazz writers have in common. Their job, they believe, is to speak up for the exotic Negro or use that Negro as a weapon against their own middle-class backgrounds or make that Negro into a symbol of their desire to do something bold, wild and outside of convention. Even being in the presence of such stuff will do, since Davis points out that rap now allows the young white person to come in contact with the Negro most removed from the white world, which used to be the role of jazz. Is that so? Since the rap Negro is nothing, at his most "street," than a theatrical version of Zip Coon, a character from the minstrel shows, how is he removed from the white world? Every Negro inferior to a middlebrow white man like Davis fits comfortably in the white world, where black refinement is never expected or is dismissed as pompous.

Disturbed by the way things have gone over the last couple of decades, Davis' answer to his Negro problem is to create an alternative order of significance. He sees, as do so many of these men, jazz that is based on swing and blues as the enemy and, therefore, lifts up someone like, say, Dave Douglas as an antidote to too much authority from the dark side of the tracks. Douglas, a graduate of Exeter and a dropout from the New Jersey upper middle class, is the perfect white man to lead the music "forward." Unlike these misled uptown Negroes who spend too much time messing around with stuff like the blues and swinging, Downtown Dave brings truly new stuff into

jazz, like Balkan folk material that surely predates the 20th century in which blues and jazz were born.