

Book Review: Jazz: New York in the Roaring Twenties by Robert Nippoldt and Hans-Jurgen Schaal

By **Jack Goodstein** | Friday, June 7, 2013

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While illustrator, graphic designer Robert Nippoldt's *Jazz: New York in the Roaring Twenties* is a beautifully designed book, I suspect it will find greater favor with fine book lovers than diehard jazz enthusiasts. The original German edition won a 2008 European Design Award in Stockholm and was designated "The Most Beautiful Book of Germany" by the Institute for Book Arts in Frankfurt. In 2007, it won an Illustrative Award as one of the most beautiful books in Europe in Berlin, and this new English translation is no less handsome. If what you want is a book that is in itself a work of art, this is the book for you. If you want a comprehensive history of jazz in the New York Roaring Twenties, you may be disappointed.



Less a history of the period, the text written by Hans-Jürgen Schaal, focuses on some 20 individual musicians and their contributions to the form. In short essays running a few hundred words we are told something about their lives, their music and their relation to the New York jazz scene. The content ranges from factual information to anecdotal gossip, with the later often garnering the most interest.

For example, we are told that Willie "The Lion" Smith sometimes

claimed that he got his nickname because at one time he aspired to be a cantor in a synagogue. Benny Goodman, it turns out, wasn't a particularly nice person: he was cheap, jealous of other soloists and hyper-critical. Zoot Sims, asked how he liked touring Russia with Goodman, said that playing with Goodman was always like playing in Russia. Violinist Joe Venuti's practical jokes, Bix Beiderbecke's drinking, Paul Whiteman's ineptitude, these are the kinds of details likely to stick with the reader.

Each chapter includes a large sepia drawing of the subject as well as a tiny avatar which is used in the text whenever that musician is mentioned. A small box on the page includes the avatar and basic information like dates

and places of birth and death, age at which the musician first recorded, and number of recording sessions. An identifying key to all the avatars is included at the end of the book as well. There are also a number of excellent two page drawings of the city, clubs and performing ensembles. At their best the drawings like that of the Whiteman orchestra premiere of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and Jelly Roll Morton playing in a brothel with zest capture the excitement of the period.

Perhaps the book's major gift for the jazz lover is the inclusion of a 20-track CD featuring classic performances from nearly all of the musicians discussed in the text. Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong sing

"St Louis Blues." James P. Johnson plays "The Harlem Strut." Duke Ellington and the Cotton Club Orchestra do "Mood Indigo." Drawings of the original record labels are also included. There is music from Cab Calloway, Benny Goodman, Chick Webb, Ethel Waters and Fats Waller and that's not half of the talent. Given the age of the originals, the sound is quite good. For many, the CD alone would be worth the price of the book.

