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Mitchell & Ruff: An American Profile In Jazz



Synopsis

"Highly recommended" #151;Library Journal" In this account of the world adventures of two splendid jazz artists, Bill Zinsser has given us one of the most exciting books about America's original art form that I've ever read. It's a revelation." #151;Studs Terkel Since 1955, Dwiki Mitchell and Willie Ruff have been playing, teaching, and sharing jazz around the U.S. and around the world. William Zinsser, one of our finest chroniclers of American life, tells their story as he travels with the duo to China, to Davenport, Iowa, to New York City, and #151;with Willie Ruff #151;to St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, where Ruff journeys back to the roots of Western music in order to understand jazz's musical legacy. Zinsser also accompanies Mitchell and Ruff as they visit their hometowns in Florida and Alabama. We listen as the two men tell of growing up in small towns in the American South of the 1930s and 40s; as they tell about the teachers, community leaders, and family members who believed in two young black men with talent but no formal musical training; as they tell of their struggles, their perseverance, and their ultimate success. Jazz is indeed a uniquely American musical tradition, and there are no better guides to this inspiring art than Dwiki Mitchell and Willie Ruff. "[This is a] thoughtful, adept, and satisfyingly unusual book of reportage #133; Though its contents are entirely factual, it concerns lives that give the sense of being but fatefully, imaginatively, arranged, and it constantly suggests improvisation #151; that is, 'something created during the process of delivery,' as Mr. Ruff explains the term to the Chinese #133; He also tells them improvisation is 'the lifeblood of jazz.' William Zinsser's book reminds us that improvisation is the lifeblood of life, too. [This book is also] about difficult passages that end in victorious arrival. Mitchell & Ruff is a deservedly happy book." #151;New York Times Book Review "A highly infectious, Studs Terkel-like chronicle about the unorthodox development of two distinguished musicians." #151;Publishers Weekly "Jazz came to China for the first time on the afternoon of June 2, 1981, when the American bassist and French-horn player Willie Ruff introduced himself and his partner, the pianist Dwiki Mitchell, to several hundred students and professors who were crowded into a large room at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Probably they were not surprised to find that the two musicians were black #133; What they undoubtedly didn't expect was that Ruff would talk to them in Chinese." #151;from Chapter 1, "Shanghai" William Zinsser is a lifelong journalist and nonfiction writer #151; he began his career on the New York Herald Tribune in 1946 #151; and is also a teacher, best known for his book On Writing Well, a companion held in affection by three generations of writers, reporters, editors, teachers, and students. His 17 other books range from memoir (Writing Places) to travel (American Places), jazz (Mitchell & Ruff), American popular song (Easy to Remember), baseball (Spring Training) and the

craft of writing (Writing to Learn). During the 1970s he was at Yale University, where he was master of Branford College and taught the influential nonfiction workshop that would start many writers and editors on their careers. He has taught at the New School, in New York, his hometown, and at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Albert Murray is a cultural critic, biographer, essayist, and novelist. He has taught at several colleges, including Colgate, Barnard, and Tuskegee. Mr. Murray's works include The Omni-Americans, South to a Very Old Place, Train Whistle Guitar, The Blue Devils of Nada, and The Seven League Boots.

Book Information

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Paul Dry Books; 1st Paul Dry Books Ed edition (November 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0966491343

ISBN-13: 978-0966491340

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.4 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (4 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #386,005 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #105 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Jazz #489 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Jazz #804 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Performing Arts > Music

Customer Reviews

Get this book! Zinsser is a fabulous writer. You will be moved and enthralled by the story of these gifted and dedicated men. The author's description of Ruff explaining the concept of musical improvisation to a Chinese audience is unforgettable. I think this is a re-issue of Willie & Dwyke (1984), now out of print.

Those gray missiles that whizzed past your head were my socks, knocked off by William Zinsser's Mitchell & Ruff, an American Profile in Jazz. I do not envy Prof. Zinsser, who writes on good writing. There will always be a sniper eager to shoot him down for any deviation from his prescription for proper expression. I'm not sniping, but I was surprised that Zinsser used the expression "student body," roundly condemned by William Strunk, whose work he praises. I would have written, "The enrollment grew", instead of "The student body expanded." Strunk would have had a good laugh at that one, watching the waistlines of his Cornell charges expanding visibly to his mind's eye. And

Jerome Kern's classic tune is Yesterdays, not Yesterday, the Beatles song. Zinsser got everything else so very right. My interest never flagged, not for a moment. The structure of the book, showing the remarkable lives of the two protagonists in very specific, revealing, and memorable places, is ingenious. The ending is sudden, unexpected, and fully satisfying. Prof. Zinsser is a remarkable writer. We are accustomed to plowing through such meaningless drivel on the Internet and elsewhere, this review included, that good writing grabs us by the scruff of the neck. "Compelling," that's the word I'm looking for. And Zinsser convinced me, no, compelled me, a highly opinionated jazz fan of long date, to believe that Dwiki Mitchell, previously little more than a name to me, is one of the elite musicians that this great music has produced. As for Willie Ruff, what a great musician and what a great human being! This is the story of two lives, unwasted.

I am a big fan of Zinsser and the child of a big band sax man so had to read Willie and Dwiki. Willie and Dwiki (the earlier, out-of-print edition of this book) is the life stories of two amazing and brilliant musicians and the author who shadows them as they travel to foreign countries and small towns across the U.S. Throughout, Zinsser conveys the great minds, quiet dignity and incredible musicianship of these men so dedicated to their art - the art of jazz. It is a delightful read! A must read if you love jazz and good writing.

When asked to explain jazz, Thomas "Fats" Waller replied, "Self you got to ask, you ain't got it." (Washington Post, July 17, 1947). If anyone can write about jazz, it's Zinsser. What a masterpiece this book is -- a must-read for anyone who loves music, history, biography, or fine writing. As one reviewer put it: "this book is not just about jazz...it is jazz."

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