



An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Jazz Short Stories

Marcela Breton

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An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Jazz Short Stories

This bibliography evolved out of my dual interest in music and literature, and the realization that many jazz stories have been dispersed and buried, their initial appearance often followed by oblivion. The aim of this work is to resuscitate some of these forgotten stories; assemble references to signal works of jazz fiction, well-known and obscure; and supply brief plot descriptions so that the stories' contents can be better known.

I am defining a jazz story as one whose jazz element plays a primary role in the plot. With respect to length, some stories, such as Julio Cortázar's "The Pursuer" and Malcolm Lowry's "The Forest Path to the Spring," are very long, while others, such as William Saroyan's "Jazz," are not much more than sketches.

The works listed below range chronologically from Ring Lardner's "Rhythm" (1926) to William Kotzwinkle's "Django Reinhardt Played the Blues" (1989). They incorporate a great variety of jazz styles—swing, bebop, free jazz, and so forth—and much diversity regarding literary genre—mystery and detective stories, fantasies/fables, works of science fiction, comedies and tragedies. The authors are for the most part American, but Julio Cortázar, Maurice Roelants, Malcolm Lowry, and Josef Škvorecký are from Argentina, Belgium, Britain, and Czechoslovakia, respectively. Besides the U.S., the settings for these stories include Paris, Budapest, Mexico, Canada, the French Riviera, and the Caribbean.

Entries by African-American authors are prefaced with an asterisk (*). Reprint information is given for stories collected in my anthology *Hot and Cool* (New York: Plume, 1990) and for several other stories which originally appeared in obscure publications but have been reprinted in widely distributed anthologies.

Allen, Steve. *Bop Fables*. New York: Simon, 1955.

Allen, an American TV personality, has rewritten well-known children's fables such as "The Three Little Pigs" and "Little Red Riding Hood" in a bebop vernacular. Because Allen makes the characters particular musicians, their dialogue incorporates references to the 1950s jazz scene. One of the stories, "Three Mixed-Up Little Pigs," was originally published in the 20 May 1953 issue of *Down Beat*.

*Angelou, Maya. "The Reunion." *Confirmation: An Anthology of African-American Women*. Ed. Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka. New York: Quill, 1983. 54-58. Rpt. Breton 222-28.

Philomena Jenkins, a black jazz pianist, meets her former white employer while playing a gig in a bar on Chicago's South Side.

Marcela Breton is a jazz and literary critic. She is editor of the anthology *Hot and Cool: Jazz Short Stories* (1990).

She comes away with the realization that, while she lacks wealth and social status, her musical talent constitutes a much richer thing. Although the story contains an angry indictment of white society, it is also quite humorous.

*Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." *Partisan Review* 24 (1957): 327-58. Rpt. Breton 92-130.

In this widely anthologized story, Sonny, a junkie and jazz pianist, and his brother, the narrator of the story, have completely different philosophies of life. In a final effort to try to understand Sonny, the narrator goes to hear him play. The music, and what it conveys about Sonny's identity as a suffering black man, provides the narrator with a moment of transcendence in which he comes to terms with his brother's situation and, ultimately, with his own suffering humanity.

*Bambara, Toni Cade. "Medley." *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*. New York: Random, 1977. 103-24. Rpt. Breton 239-59.

A funny story about the break-up of a manicurist named Honey and her live-in lover Larry, a bassist. The story's climax involves Honey's recollection of the last night the two spent together, in which they sang a medley of jazz tunes while showering.

Barthelme, Donald. "The King of Jazz." *New Yorker* 7 Feb. 1977: 31-32. Rpt. Breton 234-38.

Barthelme satirizes one of jazz's most established rituals: the cutting contest. In the course of an afternoon, Hokie Mokie, the king of the trombone, loses his title to a Japanese upstart, Hideo Yamaguchi, who in turn loses it to Mokie. The story reflects Barthelme's absurdist sense of humor.

Beaumont, Charles. "Black Country." *Playboy* 1954: 6+.

Spoof, a trumpet player dying of cancer, kills himself after a desperate ef-

fort to articulate unexpressed emotions on his instrument. Strangely, Sonny, his replacement, starts behaving like the dead Spoof. One night Sonny shows up with Spoof's trumpet and gives full expression to the range of sounds that the deceased Spoof had tried but failed to produce.

*Brown, Frank London. "McDougal." *Phoenix Magazine* Fall 1961: 32-33. Rpt. *Black Voices*. Ed. Abraham Chapman. New York: NAL, 1968. 201-04.

McDougal, a white trumpet player in an all-black jazz band, is married to a black woman and has four children to support. The fact that McDougal, though not a virtuoso, plays with great emotion, and has suffered, elicits the admiration of his fellow musicians.

*———. "Singing Dinah's Song." *Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, 1940-1962*. Ed. Herbert Hill. New York: Knopf, 1963. 348-54.

A factory worker, Daddy-O, finds relief from his exhausting work schedule in listening to and singing the songs of Dinah Washington. He eventually suffers a nervous breakdown, however, from the stress of the job.

Chandler, Raymond. "The King in Yellow." *Dime Detective* Mar. 1938: 42-74. Rpt. *The Simple Art of Murder*. Boston: Houghton, 1950. 99-161.

Steve Grayce, the house detective of the Carlton Hotel, is called upon to break up a loud jam session on the hotel's eighth floor. There he finds the famed trumpeter King Leopardi playing trombone, accompanied by a clarinetist and saxophonist; all are intoxicated. Grayce then must solve a murder committed in the hotel. The plot is mostly standard fare, with several corpses (including the King's), a beautiful woman, and the eventual capture of the killers.

Cortázar, Julio. "El Perseguidor" ("The Pursuer"). *Las Armas Secretas*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1959. 99-183. Rpt. Breton 269-331.

This story is a fictionalization of key incidents in the life of Charlie Parker: his attempted suicide by iodine poisoning, the death of Parker's young daughter, the hotel fire after which Parker ran through the hallways naked, and his death in the apartment of Nica Koenigswater. "El Perseguidor" is also an examination of the role of the jazz critic. Cortázar discusses, among other things, the way in which critics create misconceptions about jazz musicians. Curious differences exist between the English translation (by Paul Blackburn) and the original Spanish: *junk* (heroin) replaces *marijuana*, at one point; and, at another, characters in the translation discuss a piano solo by Bud Powell, whereas the pianist in the original is Billy Taylor.

Cundiff, Lucy. "Trumpet Man." *Saturday Evening Post* 19 June 1954: 31+.

Dan Daly, a horn player down on his luck, gets a chance to play one of his compositions for a music promoter. On the night the promoter is in the audience, Daly manages to play the best trumpet of his life. This story captures the fatigue that sets in after years on the road, and Daly's early bitter realization that he will never be more than an average trumpet player.

De Vries, Peter. "Jam Today." *New Yorker* 4 Feb. 1950: 34-35. Rpt. Breton 48-52.

This humorous story about conflicts in musical taste involves a devotee of swing music who attends a party where the host and a majority of guests are partisans of bebop.

Duke, Osborn. "Oh Jazz, Oh Jazz." *Eddie Condon's Treasury of Jazz*.

Ed. Eddie Condon and Richard Gehman. New York: Dial, 1956. 461-88.

A jazz musician is forced to choose between staying in his band or, as his pregnant wife requests, getting a "normal" job. The male musician's world is discussed in detail, and women are characterized as intruders and despoilers. A minor theme is the conflict between commercial success and artistic integrity.

Eisele, Albert. "The Dance." *Commonweal* 4 June 1943: 164-66.

A young trombone player, Jimmy, is jilted by Emma, the girl he loves. Jimmy's band is hired to play a dance at the Pavilion Hall, and, on the night of the event, there is a fierce thunderstorm. Despite the weather, the band is forced to play for the only couple in attendance: Emma and her new beau! Eisele uses the sounds and scenes of agrarian life to create unusual metaphors for jazz music.

Emerson, Stephen. "An Unknown Distance." *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 37. Ed. J[ames] Laughlin. New York: New Directions, 1978. 158-64.

This work explores the abyss between the sexes: the "unknown distance." Its disjointed, truncated narrative style mirrors the intensely improvisational nature of free jazz, and there are repeated references to such free jazz figures as Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman.

*Fisher, Rudolph. "Common Meter." *Baltimore Afro-American* 8-15 Feb. 1930: 11. Rpt. Breton 12-28.

Fisher's story deals with a battle-of-the-bands contest. The dance hall where the contest takes place, the competing musicians, the music they play, the dancers, and the machinations employed by the "evil" bandleader in

order to win the contest are portrayed with realism and humor.

Foote, Shelby. "Tell Them Good-bye." *Saturday Evening Post* 15 Feb. 1947: 20-21.

A somewhat melodramatic story about Duff, a black cornetist completely devoted to his music, who, in a jealous rage, shoots another man and is condemned to die in the electric chair. A later version, entitled "Ride Out," includes a slightly longer ending.

Gardner, Martin. "The Devil and the Trombone." *Record Changer* May 1948: 10. Rpt. Breton 44-47.

A college professor, on his way home after a meeting of the Philosophical Society, hears the sound of an organ coming from the university chapel. Upon entering, he finds an angel playing the instrument. A trombone-playing devil joins in, permitting Gardner to make an extended commentary on the joyous, melancholy nature of jazz music.

———. "The Fall of Flatbush Smith." *Esquire* Sept. 1947: 44.

This story is loosely based on the life of cornetist Bunk Johnson. A jazz critic decides to glorify a mediocre New Orleans-style musician as a kind of practical joke on his journalist friends. In time the cornetist improves his technique, at which point the jazz press accuses him of "selling out."

———. "The Trouble with Trombones." *Record Changer* Oct. 1948: 10.

Anxious to amuse a pretty lady, a trombone player shows off by playing the trombone with his feet, but he loses his balance, falls off his chair, and sprains his wrist. The woman, Sybil, offers to sit in. Everyone is amazed at her prowess and wonders where she learned to play. The trombonist discovers that she is an oboist with the local symphony. Sybil later

allows him to sit in for her and discovers he is a better oboist than trombonist! They switch jobs and get married.

Grennard, Elliott. "Sparrow's Last Jump." *Harper's* May 1947: 419-26.

The author, a *Billboard* correspondent who was present at Charlie Parker's ill-fated *Lover Man* session for Dial Records, reinterprets that event with his portrayal of an erratic, spasmodic soloist slowly self-destructing from drugs and mental illness.

Howard, Clark. "Horn Man." *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* 2 June 1980: 54-65.

A musician's involvement with a woman leads to trouble with the law. Set in New Orleans, the story offers a glimpse into that city's past and present jazz scene.

*Hughes, Langston. "The Blues I'm Playing." *Scribner's* May 1934: 345-51. Rpt. Breton 60-78.

Oceola Jones is the latest artist to be sponsored by the wealthy, white Mrs. Ellsworth. Ellsworth wants Jones to devote herself completely to playing concerts, but Jones also plays jazz piano at all-night gatherings where whites and blacks mix freely and gin flows. There are a number of conflicts in this story, including "classical" music versus jazz and blues, "high society" versus Harlem, and the ivory tower artist versus the instinctive, passionate one.

*———. "Bop." *The Best of Simple*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1961. 117-19.

Simple, a lover of bebop, is trying to convince the skeptical narrator that there is more to the music than nonsense syllables. He traces the origin of bop to police violence against blacks: "Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, 'BOP! BOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP! . . .

BOP!" . . . That's why so many white folks don't dig bop. . . . White folks do not get their heads beat just for being white.' "

*——. "Jazz, Live, and Jam." *Simple Stakes a Claim*. New York: Holt, 1957. 186-91.

Simple's woman drags him to lectures designed to promote better race relations. Simple finds these events dreary and does his best to convince her that a little jazz would do more for the cause of integration than all the lecturing in the world.

*——. "Rejuvenation through Joy." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 1934. Rpt. *The Ways of White Folks*. New York: Knopf, 1934. 66-95.

An enclave for the rich, the Colony of Joy, is established by Mr. Eugene Lesch, who employs jazz musicians to entertain his wealthy patrons. Here women compete with one another for the attentions of the handsome Lesch. A subplot deals with the love affair between Miss Tulane Lucas, a singer in a jazz band, and that band's drummer.

Jones, James. "The King." *Playboy* Oct. 1955: 25+.

The King, a New Orleans trumpet player, is idolized by five college-bound young men who try to make a go of their own band. Jones explores the ways in which legends are created by the mass media.

*Jones, LeRoi (Amiri Baraka). "The Screamers." *Genesis West* 2.5 (1963): 81-86. Rpt. Breton 260-68.

A saxophonist and his sidemen lead a trail of jazz club patrons out into the street. For a moment it looks as if the awaited revolution has arrived. The honking, screaming saxophonists—Illinois Jacquet, Gene Ammons, and various Texan tenor players—are portrayed throughout in heroic terms.

Kotzwinkle, William. "Django Reinhardt Played the Blues." *The Hot*

Jazz Trio. Boston: Lawrence, 1989. 3-99.

Set in 1920s Paris, this surrealist story about Django Reinhardt and his Hot Jazz Trio includes descriptions of the ensemble—in particular, Reinhardt's guitar sound—and brief philosophical meditations on the nature of music by an American expatriate saxophonist, a member of the band.

Lardner, Ring. "Rhythm." *The Love Nest and Other Stories*. New York: Scribner's, 1926. 163-83.

The conflict between Harry Hart, a composer of jazz hits who is given to borrowing from classical music, and Benny Kane, who feels it is wrong to "work on a melody that had been swiped from somewhere," suggests that all music is derivative, and that borrowing freely is at the heart of jazz composition.

Lowry, Malcolm. "The Forest Path to the Spring." *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961. 215-83.

An ex-jazz musician and his wife go to British Columbia for their honeymoon and decide to resettle there. The idyllic scenery inspires the musician to compose a jazz symphony. Descriptions of his days as a jazz musician, when everything was a haze of late nights and alcohol, is contrasted with the peaceful, fulfilled existence he now has.

Marsh, Willard. "Mending Wall." *Southern Review* ns 5 (1969): 1192-1204. Rpt. Breton 185-99.

Miguel, a law student at an American university, returns to his native Mexico during a semester break. Some of his fellow students, who are amateur jazz musicians, also decide to vacation there. As a courtesy, Miguel invites them to his place for beer. The more his guests drink, the more they show contempt for Hispanics, and even jazz.

Merril, Judith. "Muted Hunger." *Saint Mystery Magazine* Oct. 1963: 51-63.

The wife of a detective investigating an assault notices that a jazz band she likes lacks cohesion, that each musician is uncharacteristically absorbed in his own playing. This leads her to suspect that the band members may be privy to some knowledge of the crime, and this leads, ultimately, to the unraveling of the mystery.

*Petry, Ann. "Solo on the Drums." *The Magazine of the Year*. New York: Associated Magazine, 1947. 105-10. Rpt. Breton 53-59.

In this lyrical story about a musician's complete identification with his instrument, Kid Jones, a jazz drummer, learns that his wife is leaving him for a pianist, the Marquis of Brund. Jones's drumming becomes a means of expressing his sorrow.

Powers, J. F. "He Don't Plant Cotton." *Accent* 3 (Winter 1943): 106-13. Rpt. Breton 79-91.

A group of drunken, white Southern men interrupts the performance of a black jazz trio by repeatedly requesting "Ol' Man River." The trio plays the tune once, infusing it with a sense of irony unperceived by the listeners. When the men continue to request the tune, the trio leaves the club rather than give in. The final scene, in which the trio waits for a cab as a light snow falls, is one of bittersweet triumph.

Roelants, Maurice. *De Jazz-speler* ("The Jazz Player"). Amsterdam: Salm, 1938. Trans. Jo Mayo. *Harvest of the Lowlands: An Anthology in English Translation of Creative Writing in the Dutch Language*. Ed. J. Greshoff. New York: Querido, 1945. 357-75.

A vacationing furniture manufacturer, who yearns for an escape from his routine, witnesses an ecstatic performance by a black jazzman and is

compelled to become a jazz musician. The story is unfortunately marred by the stereotyped description of a drummer: "He was what is generally called a pure Negro: very ugly because of the protruding cheekbones, the brutish thick lips, the flattened nose, the ears that stuck out from the dusty frizzy hair."

Saroyan, William. "Jazz." *Hairenik Daily* [Boston] 2 June 1934. Rpt. *My Name is Saroyan*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1983. 90-93.

The disparate, inchoate sounds of the city—the mixture of street vendor cries, train whistles, fire alarms, the howling of cats—become a metaphor for a "kind of nervous noise that was being heard all over our country, and it was called jazz." Saroyan's brief composition, though arranged as prose, contains the elements of poetry.

Scott, Tony. "Destination K.C." *The Jazz Word*. Ed. Dom Cerulli, Bert Korall, and Mort Nasatir. New York: Ballantine, 1960. 80-83.

This ironic story, written by a jazz clarinetist in the hip, sometimes esoteric language of the jazz musician, describes a fan's final encounter with his idol, Charlie Parker.

Shacochis, Bob. "Lord Short Shoe Wants the Monkey." *Playboy* July 1982: 116+.

Set in the Caribbean, "Lord Short Shoe" is primarily about how the main character trades his prized trained monkey for a woman. The opening of the story captures the mood and physical surroundings of a jazz club.

Škvorecký, Josef. "Bebop of Richard Kambaly" ("The Bebop of Richard Kambala"). *Hořkej svět*. Prague: Odeon, 1969. 271-78. Trans. Kaca Polackova-Henley. *Rampike* 3.3-4.1 (1984-85): 101-05.

This story is written in the form of an obituary. Kambala, a flugelhornist who plays bebop in the cafés of Budapest, falls in love with the disdainful Marcella, who rejects him when she realizes the extent of his infatuation. Kambala commits suicide after his ensemble plays thirty-seven minutes of "existentialism in unwritten notes"—the most expressive, lyrical jazz they have ever played.

—. "Eine Kleine Jazzmusik."
Sedmiramenný svícen. Prague: Naše vojsko, 1964. 110-30. *Literary Review* Fall 1969: 47-61. Rpt. Breton 131-47.

The Masked Rhythm Bandits, a jazz band comprised of trumpeter Paddy and his schoolmates, want to stage a jazz concert but are prevented from doing so by their headmaster, Czermack, a Nazi sympathizer. The band eventually plays the concert by means of a clever prank devised by Paddy's girlfriend, Suzy, the band's lead singer. But for this, they pay dearly.

—. "ten.sax.solo" ("That Sax Solo").
Smutek poručíka borůvky. Prague: Mladá fronta, 1966. 26-37. Trans. Rosemary Kavan. *The Mournful De-meanor of Lieutenant Boruvka*. London: Gollancz, 1973. 25-36.

The lead singer of a jazz band is found murdered. The first suspect is her recently estranged lover, a sax player. His alibi is that he was in his hotel room practicing on his instrument at the time of the crime, which several witnesses corroborate. Lieutenant Boruvka, however, is not convinced. The resolution of the plot has to do with the particular sax solo that was played while the murder was taking place.

Smith, C. W. "The Plantation Club."
Southwest Review 62 (1977): 47-63. Rpt. Breton 200-21.

A black bebop musician and two white teenagers who idolize him are

arrested for smoking marijuana. The musician's imprisonment and the youths' release are indicative of America's uneven application of justice. The various gestures, speech, and dress associated with the bebop period are described at length.

Southern, Terry. "The Night the Bird Blew for Doctor Warner." *Harper's* Jan. 1956: 101+.

The erudite Doctor Warner is writing a monograph, *From Bach to Bop*. In an effort to authenticate the sections of the book that deal with bebop, Warner decides that he must try heroin. His attempt to procure the drug proves disastrous.

—. "You're Too Hip, Baby." *Esquire* Apr. 1963: 68+. Rpt. Breton 148-61.

A Yale graduate living in Paris befriends a jazz musician and his wife. As in Yates's "A Really Good Jazz Piano," Southern's characters consider themselves well-informed and well-adjusted, but lack self-understanding. The epiphany (in both stories) involves the main characters' realizing that they are less "hip" than they think.

Sylvester, Robert. "The Lost Chords."
Eddie Condon's Treasury of Jazz. Ed. Eddie Condon and Richard Gehman. New York: Dial, 1956. 435-47.

This story is essentially a litany of ills that plague jazz musicians—from the one-night stands, drinking and drugs, and a fickle public, to "selling out" in order to survive. A trombonist, sitting in his apartment, is waiting for an interviewer from a leading jazz magazine. Because the trombonist is purportedly "on the wagon," he takes benzedrine to keep from drinking.

Tilley, Robert J. "Willie's Blues." *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* May 1972: 54-75.

A science fiction story in which the main character travels back in time to 1936 in an effort to verify jazz history.

Weeks, Jack. "The Funeral of the King." 1950. *Eddie Condon's Treasury of Jazz*. Ed. Eddie Condon and Richard Gehman. New York: Dial, 1956. 424-34.

A humorous tale about two ex-cons, Sledge and Blue Tick. Sledge, the "King of the Banjo," lives in New York City and owes Blue Tick money. When Blue Tick arrives in New York to collect, he discovers that Sledge is dead, and a funeral service is to be held that night. After the service, a collection is taken to defray the funeral costs!

Welty, Eudora. "Powerhouse." *Atlantic* June 1941: 707-13. Rpt. Breton 29-43.

This widely anthologized story features Powerhouse, a boogie-woogie jazz pianist in the tradition of Meade "Lux" Lewis and Albert Ammons. He is a "person of joy, a fanatic" whose name connotes the sheer exuberance

with which he approaches piano playing, drinking, and lovemaking.

Yates, Richard. "A Real Good Jazz Piano." *Short Story*, 1. New York: Scribner's, 1958. 49-70. Rpt. Breton 162-84.

Ken and Carson, two well-educated, well-traveled young men who regard themselves as sophisticates, befriend Sid, a jazz pianist. The story, a modern re-enactment of Peter's denial of Jesus, has as its denouement Ken and Carson's betrayal of Sid.

*Young, Al. "Chicken Hawk's Dream." *Spero* 1.2 (1966): 19-21. Rpt. Breton 229-33.

Chicken Hawk is a drug user who dreams one night that he can play the alto saxophone. When he is offered a gig, he fails to draw even the tiniest sound from the instrument, which he attributes to the "jive horn." Young's story explores the difference between one who lives amidst phantoms and delusions, and the disciplined musician who wrestles with the concrete and real; it illustrates how grand yet difficult it is to become a working jazz musician.