

## KEEPING TIME: KLOOK REMEMBERS JAZZ DRUMMER'S PLACE IN HISTORY

by Phillip Daquila

### *Klook: The Story of Kenny Clarke*

by Mike Hennessey

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994. Pp. xiv, 373. Acknowledgements, foreword (by Dizzy Gillespie), preface, bibliography, discography, sources, index, photographs. \$22.50 paperback.

**I**F THE central question for listeners of jazz music trying to gain perspective on the story of an individual musician is, "Who has he played with?" it is because the answer simultaneously creates a mystique and helps to peel away layers of misunderstanding. Even before hearing a recording by the artist, the student of jazz history who has learned the familiar name of a bandmate begins to see a collaboration at work, a timeline unfolding. Notoriety for the jazz musician is marked as much by associations as by the style of music or even the performer's instrument.

As good an introduction as any, then, to Pittsburgh-born Kenneth Clarke Spearman, is to rattle off a string of luminaries with whom the drummer performed: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Sidney Bechet, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Bud Powell, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, Count Basie, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Ella Fitzgerald, Tadd Dameron, Fats Navarro, Sarah Vaughan, Zoot Sims, Chet Baker, James Moody, J.J. Johnson, Sonny Stitt, Art Tatum and Gerry Mulligan. With such a long career (55 years), both in the United States and in Europe, Kenny "Klook" Clarke, as he was known professionally, nearly stands alone in the depth of his catalog of colleagues. Mike Hennessey, a magazine writer who knew Clarke the last 25 years of his life, does his share of name-dropping, but fortunately makes few assumptions about the reader's jazz knowledge: even the most recognizable figures are defined on first reference. Considering all the names to enjoy ruffling around for, *Klook*, oddly, is the first full-length account of the life and music of Clarke. Perhaps if jazz trivia were more neatly packaged — "Who has played with more legends than any other performer?" on the reverse of Clarke's jazz trading card — Klook would be a beneficiary.

Clarke is more than a product of who he accompanied, of course; his technical skills were what ultimately made him hireable. Virtually any jazz reference credits Clarke for bridging the shift from swing to bebop by remodeling the rhythm section (as well as for being a founding member of the Modern Jazz Quartet). *Klook* the book is no different. It reminds the reader that

Clarke, inspired by Basie's Jo Jones and Armstrong's Sid Catlett, introduced a lightness to drumming by transferring the rhythmic pulse from the drum heads (usually the bass drum) to the cymbals. Instead of simply keeping time with a steady four beats to the measure, as had been done by swing drummers with the responsibility of driving a danceable sound, Klook used his right hand continuously on the top cymbal (later called the "ride cymbal") and freed up his left hand to prod the bop ensemble with unpredictable accents on the snare and the "dropping of bombs" on the bass drum. Hennessey illuminates the origin of these improvisational developments, suggesting that Clarke had started the process a full 10 years before the well documented events of Minton's Playhouse in Harlem in the early 1940s. While his own descriptions of music theory and drumming techniques are rather slim, Hennessey has the good judgment to excerpt the authoritative Gunther Schuller. From Schuller's *The Swing Era*, we are treated to the following, which refers to Clarke's stint with the Edgar Hayes orchestra, with whom he first recorded in 1937:

Twenty-three years of age when he joined Hayes, Clarke was from the beginning an individual, imaginative percussionist who saw no sense in playing in any of the accepted drumming swing styles.... Clarke remained loyal to the snare drum and bass drum, using both instruments...to evolve a new style of drumming that integrated the drums much more into the arrangements and soloists' work. By participating in the orchestra's rhythmic figures as a full-fledged ensemble instrument..., the result was suddenly a true musical dialogue between drums and orchestra, a discourse lifting the drums (at least partially) out of their limited role as a mere provider of rhythmic substructures.... Clarke's drumming on almost all the Hayes sides is exciting to hear.... Clarke's timing and sense of balance were superb, especially considering that he was pioneering a whole new concept of big-band drumming. For here we have the beginnings of modern drumming.

So not only did Kenny Clarke identify the rhythmic demands of the complex, rapid-fire bebop melodies and create a technique to meet them, but he also, this book tells us, changed the language for the monotonous drumming style of swing orchestra music.

Where did all this trail-blazing begin? Hennessey's research tells him that Kenny Clarke was probably born in Mercy Hospital in January 1914. The family home was on Wylie Avenue in the integrated Lower Hill. Clarke's mother, Martha Grace Scott, also born in Pittsburgh, was an accomplished pianist, according to Kenny, and he recalls sitting on her knee learning simple tunes. He may have become a professional pianist, Hennessey speculates, had his mother lived to continue giving Kenny lessons. But she died suddenly in her late 20s, when Kenny was about 5. Kenny's father, Charles Spearman, from Georgia, played some trombone, but had deserted the family to start another one in Washington even before

Phillip Daquila, a self-taught saxophonist who developed a special interest in jazz history along the way, lived in Pittsburgh for four years, until last fall. A free-lance writer, he now lives in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Martha died. The author provides interesting interview material in which Clarke gives varying accounts of his painful childhood. He blocked from his mind the difficulties of being an orphan, even going out of his way to create positive recollections of the period. As the always protective Hennessey tells it, “Kenny tended to soften the harsher realities of his early years.” But it was at the Coleman Industrial Home for Negro Boys in the Hill District, a dilapidated house with two bedrooms for 33 boys, that Clarke, at the age of 8 or 9, picked up his first drumsticks. A Mr. Moore, the orphanage’s teacher, “capable of playing all the instruments,” according to Kenny, urged him to try the snare drum. He played drums in the band at Herron Hill Junior High School, his last formal school. He dropped out at 15 and spent time hanging around downtown clubs, soaking in the show-business atmosphere.

The research of the early years is surprisingly thorough: Hennessey actually uncovered the names of two Irishmen, Hammond and Gurlock, owners of a music store on Penn Avenue, who taught Kenny to play a proper roll on the snare drum. Clarke’s first professional drumming job was with the Leroy Bradley band as a substitute for a Pittsburgh fireman playing dance music three or four times a month. He was eventually made full-time with this band, one of the first to be heard over the air via KDKA radio. Due to Clarke’s rapid development on his instrument, “the almost mandatory pilgrimage to New York” beckoned, and by the winter of 1935, Clarke had left Pittsburgh at age 21 for the jazz capital of the world. Though Clarke didn’t remain long in his hometown, Hennessey takes every opportunity to provide factoids relevant to the city. One of the best tidbits is that a young Kenny Clarke shared altar boy duties with another boy destined to become a jazz legend, bandleader and singer Billy Eckstine.

In his preface, Mike Hennessey states that his premise for completing a biography on Clarke is to honor his old friend, making good on a promise to the drummer from 1976. He even apologizes to Clarke’s widow and son for not finishing the book sooner. The author’s belief — that Clarke has not been given his rightful place as a revolutionary in the history of jazz — not only is stated repeatedly throughout this book, but Hennessey appears to have overcompensated, as every remark about the musician’s attempt to elevate his character, leading the reader to reprove the intimacy of writer and subject. Hennessey does not reveal how much time he spent around Clarke as he reported on the jazz scene, but his fondness for the musician harms his presentation. Countless instances of Hennessey’s defending of Clarke as he summarizes his subject’s actions and motives grow weary for the reader. On Clarke’s conversion to the Muslim religion shortly after completing his army service in 1946, he writes, “Although Klook was certainly angry and bitter about the insidious racial discrimination that existed in the States, it is doubtful whether his commitment to Islam extended to complete sympathy with the militant Black Muslims...” and, “It is difficult to visualize Kenny Clarke, for all his hatred of prejudice, as a true supporter of Malcolm X, even though he had some very positive things to say about [him]....” In addition, words attributed to Clarke from interviews with

Hennessey sometimes ring of heavy editing; the results make Clarke sound plastic.

Hennessey’s main explanation for the underassessment given Clarke by jazz writers over the years is that he spent the majority of his career (31 years) in France rather than in the United States. Though he remained extremely busy (the fine discography included in this volume is nearly 100 pages long), the author contends that out of sight meant out of mind. Strangely, nowhere does he suggest that as a drummer in an area of show business that rewarded the individualist, Clarke’s glamourless role as timekeeper hurt his notoriety.

That *Klook* is more a tribute to the late drumming great — complete with a chapter of transcriptions of 45 musicians’ superlatives called, “We Remember Klook” — than it is an objective biography is not the worst error, however. This book suffers most for failing to reflect what the bebop culture held most dear: Hennessey’s telling is decisively unhip! It is downright funny to picture Hennessey — a white man who describes Louis Armstrong’s notorious appreciation of marijuana by writing that “Pops was a prodigious smoker of unbranded cigarettes all his life” — being accepted by a clique of black musicians intent on creating a style and lingo so unique that it excluded even great players like Johnny Hodges, Roy Eldridge and Art Tatum.

If writing about music is compared to “dancing about architecture,” then writing about drumming, specifically, can be likened to dancing about a building’s framework; drums provide the backbone, the driving force of most modern music, yet for most listeners it is the hardest element to grasp. Such is the function of rhythm: “I know I can feel it, and I know what sounds good, but don’t ask me to talk about it.” Inherent in writing a biography of a drummer, then, Mike Hennessey has taken on a great challenge. Why, even the man’s nickname (fully “Klook-a-mop”) points out the nature of discussing drumming — people resort to onomatopoeia! As mentioned, Hennessey generally avoids discussions of technique or music theory, making this book less appealing to working musicians interested in how Clarke, Gillespie and Parker developed their methods.

A list of Kenny Clarke compositions registered with the Société des Auteurs, Compositeurs et Editeurs de Musique in Paris, is also given. It numbers 27, most notably “Epistrophe” (with Thelonious Monk) and “Salt Peanuts” (with Gillespie). Hennessey devotes too little space to discussing how the songs came about. But the book’s chronological narrative and its direct language are pluses, which may allow greater access to the material for new students of jazz history.

Jazz has never been known for its flash or image cultivation, but rather for the hard work and talent of its purveyors. Pitts-

---

*Clarke, at age 8 or 9, picked up his first drumsticks at the Coleman Industrial Home for Negro Boys in Pittsburgh’s Hill District.*

---

burgh, unlike New York, New Orleans, Chicago and Kansas City, cannot claim the emergence of a jazz movement or style, yet it is responsible for a list of fine jazz individualists disproportionate to its population. The story of Kenny Clarke and the lineage of important musicians, especially drummers, launched from Pittsburgh is worthy of scrutinization. Now, with Clarke remembered in *Klook*, musicologists need to ask, "What is the full story of jazz drumming in Pittsburgh?" Names such as Joe Harris, J. C. Moses, Art Blakey (a certifiable legend of his own), Beaver Harris and Roger Humphries, in addition to Clarke, conjure themes of blue-collar work ethic, accompaniment, driving beat, rhythm. Is the story of the drummer consistent with the character of this region? Singer Jimmy West, in a 1994 interview with Evelyn Hawkins, music director at WDUQ-FM, Pittsburgh's jazz radio station, said, "We don't like to admit it, but the steel mills gave us a beat." ❁

### ***United States Jewry: The Sephardic Period, 1776-1840***

(vol. 1)

by Jacob Rader Marcus

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989. Pp. 820. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95

Rebba Marcus, originally of the Pittsburgh suburb of Homestead, is the dean of American Jewish historians. He published in 1916 his first article about American Jewry in the *Jewish Community Bulletin* of Wheeling, W. Va. The volume under consideration here is based, in many regards, on his biographical account, *Early American Jewry* (1951 and 1955), and his sociological study, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492-1776* (1970). Although Marcus' book on the Sephardic period was published five years ago, recent works have not superseded his major conclusions, and the book remains valuable.

The work contains 17 chronologically and topically organized chapters. There are also extensive footnotes and an enormous bibliography which is based on major primary and secondary sources housed in the splendid collections of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati.

Marcus examines Jewish involvement in numerous facets of American life. American Jewry between 1776 and 1840 is explained, for the most part, from a consensual viewpoint; Marcus believes that prominent Jews during these years were assimilated and acculturated into American society. There are fine chapters about the roles of Jews during the American Revolution and early Republic, and about Jewish connections to republicanism and merchant capitalism: the leadership of Francis Salvador from 1775 to 1776 in the first two South Carolina provincial congresses; the involvement of Philadelphian Col. Solomon Bush during the 1777 Battle of Brandywine; and the activities of the Philadelphia merchants Barnard and Michael Gratz, who developed a vast commercial empire in Western Pennsylvania by providing food and clothes to Revolutionary armies.

Marcus shows that as a result of their involvement in the

American Revolution and of the enactment of the federal constitution, Jews were granted religious liberty and citizenship rights. There also are detailed sections about the place of Jewish businessmen in American society during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Marcus cites Samuel Myers of Norfolk and the Prager brothers of Philadelphia as merchant-shippers, the Gratz brothers and their sons as fur and lumber merchants and as western land speculators, David Lopez, Jr., of Newport as a commission merchant and auctioneer, and Harmon Hendricks of New York as iron-monger.

This study also contains stimulating accounts of the religion and philanthropy of early American Jews. Marcus extensively examines the organization and leadership of synagogues in Philadelphia and other eastern cities; he also discusses the frequent disputes between Sephardic and German Jews over doctrines and practices, and explains the thinking of the Philadelphian Isaac Leiser, the editor of the first American Jewish journal, *The Occident*. Leiser was both a "conforming traditionalist" and a rationalist, believing on the one hand that American Jews should embrace the theology of ancient Judaism and, on the other hand, that they should make some changes in customs and practices. Marcus also assesses the activities of Jewish charitable and educational institutions, emphasizing the importance of Hebrew benevolent societies in New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, and the significance of the creation of the Jewish Sunday school by Rebecca Gratz of Philadelphia.

In addition to their involvement in religious institutions, some American Jews became involved with assimilationist and reform movements; Marcus explains that some Jews participated in Freemasonry and that others endorsed in 1824 the efforts of Charlestonians to establish Reform Judaism in America. He also maintains that besides experiencing assimilation, some Jews encountered rejection. Marcus suggests religious, social and economic reasons for anti-Semitism, however, are not as cogent as those offered by a more recent work, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York, 1994), by Leonard Dinnerstein.

Still, scholars are greatly indebted to Marcus for this seminal work, and for his earlier studies. Eli Faber, in *A Time for Planting: The First Migration, 1654-1802* (Baltimore, 1992), cites the works of Marcus. *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, 1992), by Howard M. Sachar, contains valuable chapters about the Germanization of American Jewry and about the Americanization of Germany Jewry. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York, 1989), by Arthur Hertzberg, stresses the tensions Jews felt in the early American Republic. Both Sachar and Hertzberg acknowledge their respect for the interpretations of Marcus about issues and developments concerning early American Jewry. The authoritative works of Marcus assuredly will serve as a starting point for future studies of Jewry in early America and will not be easily surpassed. ❁

William Weisberger  
Butler County Community College