

**Swinging in Paradise:
The Story of Jazz in Montreal**
by John Gilmore

Montréal: Vehicule Press, 1988, 322 pp.

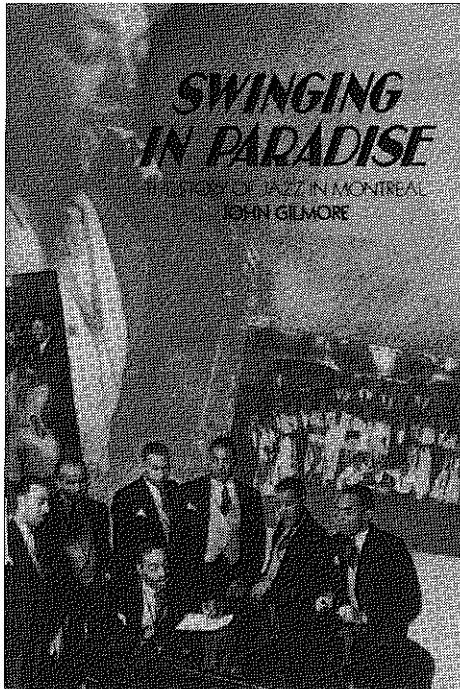
Something amazing about history is that it inevitably enhances things, objects and people, in such a way that they appear as you would have never seen them. This is normal, some would say: history is written to account for what is past and, consequently, no longer visible. I would add, however, that when what is no longer visible suddenly becomes audible, vibrating evocations, sketched stories, etc., it can ultimately take form in a very attractive vision. Is there any mystery or magic in history books, a magic which turns invisible into visible? The answer is of course to be found in the effect produced by reading, which is the only witchcraft required in this case to penetrate the secret play of appearances.

John Gilmore's *Swinging in Paradise* is, in that sense, a very good book, providing the reader with an historical survey which unveils many aspects of the presence of jazz in Montréal. Through Gilmore's book, the music, the musicians, the audiences, the bars, and even the streets which have pulsed to the jazz beat come to life with an aura either respectable or ghostly, depending on whether what is evoked is still partly present or has totally vanished. All of us can walk on Ste-Catherine street, or stand on the corner of St-Antoine and de la Montagne, but doing so, who would now expect to see jazz musicians popping out of a nightclub at eight in the morning (just after they finish their jam session), looking for a late dinner or breakfast before going to sleep? And who would suspect that some of these now anonymous streets were once the core of Montréal's hectic jazz activity? Or, again, this revelation about musical interludes on St-Laurent river: who knew that you did not need to cruise on the Mississippi river to hear live jazz played on ferries? It is along the way of such images that Gilmore drags us, halfway between historical settings and legendary effects, the whole of it really making, as the book's subtitle indicates, the story of jazz in Montréal.

This story runs roughly parallel to jazz history, from the ragtime of the early twenties, "les années folles," to the free jazz and fusion of the late sixties, following the style changes which every decade or so has seen — the hot jazz of the late twenties, the big band era of the thirties, the bebop of the forties and the cool of the fifties. From this point of view, Montréal jazz has only been a particular spot in a larger picture which includes New York, Chicago and Detroit — the principal northeastern cities where industrialisation and its emblematic trains carried the black traditional soul. But Montréal was also the place where alcohol was still flowing during the American Prohibition, and where the segregation of black people was apparently much less severe than anywhere in the States. Montréal, then, gave the jazz community a chance to emerge and to live — for a while.

Those Amorous Sessions

Jean-François Côté



It is Gilmore's project to pay attention to the life of the "jazz community" in Montréal, this moving meeting of music and people that has been dragged along in its formation by theatres and bar owners, by union requirements and union conflicts, the evolution of the "community" constantly favoured or threatened by municipal politics and filtered by the immigration net. His verdict: a jazz community



once lived in Montréal, and was even prosperous at a time when jazz musicians were hired to play in theatres (remember the ragtime music accompanying silent movies?), in ballrooms and dancing grills, and when jazz was carving its way through the various expectancies of showbiz nightclubs. However, with the decline of the entertainment business, which occurred in its full strength at the beginning of the puritan era of mayor Jean Drapeau and with the emergence of television (both events coinciding in the mid-fifties), this community slowly dissolved in the nostalgia of a glorious past. And so Gilmore, in an epigraph which he intends to stand as an epitaph for the jazz community in Montréal, can say, quoting Baudelaire, that "the delicious past shines through the sombre present." The thesis is interesting, but definitely reductive.

The "decline" of the jazz community should be seen, I think, from the broader perspective of a musical evolution toward an autonomous art form. During this evolution, jazz probably loses in coherence what it gains in status; that is to say, its roots in an "empirical community" are slowly replaced by "theoretical interest"

"Goodbye Broadway, Hello Montréal." A popular song of the Prohibition era touts Montréal's reputation for free-flowing liquor and good times.



Louis Metcalf's band at the Café St. Michel, Montréal.

for the music itself. The entertainment business, to which jazz has been linked for a long part of its history, yields its place to different authorities, and jazz then relies on different organisational forms for its expression. This does not mean that the music loses its "soul" but rather that this soul will be shaped according to new exigencies. In the case of jazz, these exigencies are first endogenous to the practice of the music itself: they concern the musicians' commitment to their music as an art, as a place where they can display their personal expression and technique in an autonomous fashion, and this is not always compatible with mere entertainment — the first boppers (Parker, Gillespie and their band) were once kicked out of a nightclub in California because their music "didn't fit the business." This means that jazz was already undergoing a change in its vocation and was leaving the entertainment business far behind its new heaven. True, the jazz clubs will emerge as specialised places where jazz can be heard, but they won't be places where people go to dance or to see a variety show: as jazz slowly emerges from its strict "accompaniment role" in entertainment, people will go to jazz bars to listen to the music itself.

In his survey of the decline of Montréal's jazz community, which would be complete by the early seventies, Gilmore doesn't mention any of the new organisational forms that take over from the former surroundings of jazz. Consequently, we are left with the impression that jazz once lived in Montréal, but that its existence faded away in the early seventies. Personally, I don't see why, except for a resolute, romantic *parti-pris*, we should deprive ourselves of seeing the new form of a "jazz community" in the various researches undertaken at this time by musicians through diverse areas (geographical as well as musical) of the music scene. We find some hints of that in the jazz clubs that have sprung up in the seventies (Le soleil levant, L'Esquire Show Bar, L'Hermitage, Le Café Mojo, etc.), the jazz programmes that are

broadcast by Radio Canada (thanks to Gilles Tremblay's faithfulness), and the permanent feeling for jazz that we still find in Montréal (even though this feeling varies in strength and form). In the absence of such considerations, it is very hard, indeed, to understand the resurgence of jazz that occurred in the late seventies (1979 sees the first edition of the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal, and the eighties the emergence of jazz programmes in universities' music faculties), and, more importantly, the actual life of jazz in Montréal — as well as anywhere else.

Gilmore brings two elements to this bias in his analysis: first, the opening of jazz tradition to "free jazz" and "fusion," and, second, the activism that shook Québec political life during the turning of the sixties into the seventies. The first element belongs entirely to jazz history, and one cannot explain the dissolution (or, more appropriately, the "reorganisation") of a particular jazz community by ignoring the fact that this is what jazz in its whole, and the jazz musicians, were experiencing at the time. This phenomenon was the peak manifestation of the new horizon opened to jazz a couple of decades ago. The second element is more touchy, as Gilmore relies ultimately on the experience of one group of musicians, Le Quatuor de jazz libre du Québec, to give an account of the destiny of the whole jazz community in Montréal. In closing his epilogue with the manifesto issued by this group (a manifesto which is obviously more concerned with a phalansterian, or micro socialist-communitarian, project than it is with music), Gilmore simply adds bitterness to nostalgia, and, because of the political orientation that is now under scrutiny, one wonders about the meaning of the "sombre present" which is the target of such bitterness. In spite of this bias, Gilmore's book

remains a worthwhile read for anyone who is interested in the development of popular culture, as well as for the jazz fan. The first would find a delightful account of the "unofficial history," which reaches some epic moments in the descriptions of the vicissitudes and pleasures of our parents and grandparents; and the jazz fan would find a good general and comprehensive topology of Montréal's contribution to jazz history — although this topology is not totally accurate or exhaustive concerning the "details" of the musicians themselves, especially the recent generations, a striking example being the inimitable drummer Guy Nadon. The style used by the author is generous, running from the anecdotal to a more elaborate overview of the periods considered; and, on the whole, the multiple sources are generally relevant. The author has included numerous photos that lead one to consider filmic tributes recently paid to jazz history (Eastwood's *Bird*, Tavernier's *'Round Midnight*, and, to a lesser degree, Mankiewicz's *Les portes tournantes* and Coppola's *Cotton Club*).

Much contemporary reflection on jazz produces an "auratic" effect on its history. This would have probably altered Walter Benjamin's pessimistic vision of the possibility of art in our century of technological invasion — and perhaps especially so because we all know how jazz, in its development, also took advantage of advances in technology. Remembering, however, that such an aura surrounds only the *actual existence* of objects and people, *Swinging in Paradise* stands as an invitation not only to look at what is past and lost but to help us to appreciate the depth that the past adds to actual practices.

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