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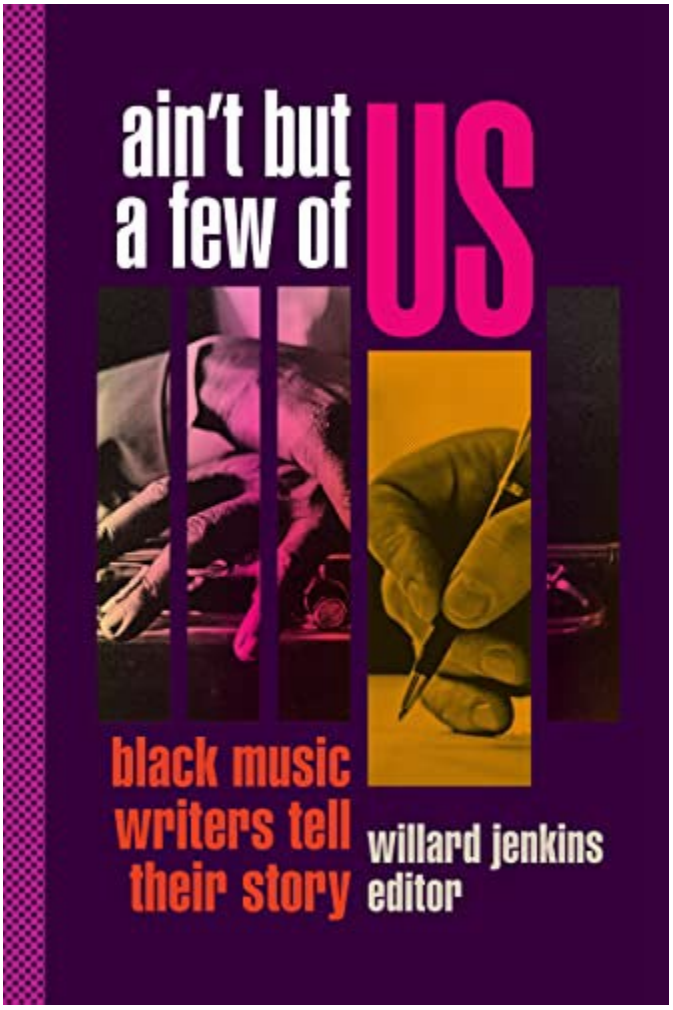
Ain't But a Few of Us: Black Music Writers Tell Their Story



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Ever since the music called jazz emerged in the Black and Creole communities of early 20th century New Orleans (as most histories of the music contend), the vast majority of journalists, authors, and critics to write about it have been white men, American and European. Little has changed in this regard; there are no Black editors or publishers of mainstream jazz publications. The *New York Times*, one of the few major newspapers still covering jazz, has never had a Black jazz critic on staff.

Ain't But a Few of Us: Black Music Writers Tell Their Story explores what the book's editor, Willard Jenkins, calls "the eternal puzzle: a music, born largely out of the African experience in America" has been written about mainly "by people almost totally outside of that experience." Jenkins has compiled interviews with and articles by a broad range of African American contributors, writers for online and print media, authors, editors, academics, and music promoters. The perspectives and opinions are varied, but as Jenkins observes, "inevitably the dialogue leads back to considerations of that specious, man-made construct known as race."

That there are "so many Black musicians making this music but so few Black writers on the subject" is partly because "it's hard to be a member of the club," that is, the big national and international jazz publications, as Robin D. G. Kelley states. Kelley, whose *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (2009) is one of the best books written about a jazz musician, writes that he briefly gained access to the club—in this case, the *New York Times*—but when the editor who recruited him left the paper, he was "kicked to the curb" by his successor.

Eugene Holley, Jr. poses a pertinent question: "Are Black writers constrained by ancestry or access?" Black writers, in any idiom, are going to confront "the Racial Mountain of prejudice and exclusion." But with the changes in 21st century media, especially the proliferation of opportunities on the internet, Black writers are "less limited by access to the media than ever before." Print is far from being the only game in town now, and writers don't have to seek publication only in major publications like *DownBeat*, *Jazz Times*, and *Jazzwise*.

White gatekeepers, however, still remain a barrier. The journalist and critic Gene Seymour was one of only four Blacks (out of 60 writers) whose work was collected in the *Oxford Companion to Jazz* anthology. The *New York Times* is hardly the only major mainstream publication to sideline Black music writers. Greg Tate, the beloved and influential critic who died in 2021, notes that *Rolling Stone* has had only five Black writers in its history, including himself.

Other factors account for the shortage of Black writers on jazz in both general interest and specialized media. There is a small pool of writers who want to write about jazz and have the knowledge and skills to do so. Black publications generally are not interested in covering jazz (other than stars like Wynton Marsalis), preferring to highlight the leading pop stars of the day. Commercial pressures dictate coverage: "Whose face on the cover will sell more magazines—Dee Dee Bridgewater or Beyoncé?" as journalist and editor Janine Coveney rhetorically asks.

The Black audience for jazz also is small, with young people, including writers, far more interested in hip-hop. "Jazz has more meaning for Black Americans as a history lesson than as a living, breathing cultural experience," according to Greg Tate. Robin D. G. Kelley, who teaches at Columbia University, writes that "my biggest frustration with some of the African American

students is that they wanted to talk about hip hop and nothing else." Kelley also points to the deterioration of arts education, which has resulted in a loss of "collective musical literacy."

Sexism has limited the opportunities available to Black women writers; Willard Jenkins notes that "the gender gap in jazz writing . . . always has been broader than the ethnic diversity gap." Finally, the people who make the music can be a problem for those who want to write about it: some jazz musicians, hostile and even mercenary, don't see the value of cooperating with writers to document their art.

The book's final chapter, "Anthology," presents 19 historical pieces published between 1946 and 2016. They include pianist Herbie Nichols' "The Jazz Pianist Purist," from 1946, an appreciation of the then-new on the scene Thelonious Monk; LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's "Jazz and the White Critic" (*DownBeat*, 1963); saxophonist and composer Archie Shepp's scorching "An Artist Speaks Bluntly" (*Downbeat*, 1965); Ron Wynn's "Where's the Black Audience?" (*Jazz Times*, 2003); and John Murph's survey of gay jazz musicians, "Rhapsody in Rainbow: Jazz and the Queer Aesthetic" (*Jazz Times*, 2010).

Ain't But a Few of Us concludes with Rex Stewart's "Smack! Memories of Fletcher Henderson," published in *DownBeat* in 1965. Stewart, a distinguished jazz cornetist who played in Duke Ellington's orchestra, provides an affectionate and informative portrait of 1920s bandleader and composer Henderson, an underappreciated but important figure who "bridged the earliest forms and what later evolved" in jazz.

Stewart's essay and the other "Anthology" selections make the strongest case of all the material in *Ain't But a Few of Us* for the special authority and privileged position of Black writers on Black music.

George de Stefano is a writer and editor living in New York City. He is the author of *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America* (Faber & Faber/Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and his writing has appeared in *The Nation, Gay City News, Film Comment, Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*, and the online publications PopMatters, Rootsworld.com, and La Voce di New York.