Appropriate Falsehoods: English Poets and American Jazz

JOHN LUCAS

Loughborough University

> He breathed in air, he breathed out light,
> Charlie Parker was my delight.

Adrian Mitchell's celebrated couplet defines a minority response, at least as far as English poets who claim an interest in jazz are concerned. They may not agree with Philip Larkin's even more celebrated anathematizing of the three Ps (Parker, Pound, and Picasso) but on the whole their devotion is given to the so-called traditional styles and masters, and for most of them 'modern jazz' is a contradiction in terms. The music of New Orleans and Chicago, of Armstrong, Beiderbecke, Condon, Ellington, Ory, and Waller, this is what jazz means for those predominantly middle-class, university-educated poets who, during the 1940s and 1950s, proclaimed their devotion in prose and verse. I want to offer some suggestions as to why this should be so, but before I do it will be as well to say something about the reputation of jazz in pre-war England.

The year to begin with is 1919. Before then there had been talk of 'ragtime', but I do not think that anyone had much sense of what that word really meant, and since they had little more to go on than Irving Berlin's 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' this is not very surprising. What does seem to be true is that during the war years, 1914–18, army officers home on leave or due to be sent out to the Western Front included among their diversions regular attendance at dinner-dances; at such dinner-dances, interspersed with the newly-fashionable and 'shocking' tango, and other, rather more acceptable, dance-music, there would be an occasional bow in the direction of 'ragtime'. This seems to have meant up-tempo numbers with a fairly solid four-to-the-bar rhythm which, considering that most orchestras were largely composed of violinists, must have sounded pretty excruciating.[1]

Then, in 1919, the Original Dixieland Jazz (or Jass) Band came to England. 'Untuneful Harmonists playing Peppery Melodies', as they rather oddly styled themselves, they produced what has been called a 'phenomenal

[1] I do not know when drummers, bass-players, and banjoists (or guitarists) became a regular feature of hotel orchestras, but what later became identified as the 'rhythm section' certainly wasn't common in those war-time orchestras, any more than a 'brass' or 'reed' section. These terms come into their own with the big bands of the 1930s, and such bands did not play ragtime.

impact' on British audiences, and numbers such as 'At the Jazz Band Ball', 'Bluin' the Blues', 'Clarinette Marmalade', and above all 'Tiger Rag' soon entered the repertory of English dance bands of the period.[2] For many people, however, even those who did not know the original meaning of the word 'jass', this was the music of a decadent society, of sexual promiscuity, of drink and drugs. Dances such as the charleston and blackbottom were widely thought to be quintessential jazz dances, and the music became a kind of do-it-yourself affair, since all you needed to make it with was a banjo or ukelele. Sheet-music, setting out simplified chord sequences for these instruments, sold in their thousands, and the Bright Young Things of the Jazz Age set about destroying themselves and others to the accompaniment of 'You're Nobody's Sweetheart Now', 'Mississippi Mud', 'Margie', and other, similar, numbers, turned out as fast as Tin-pan Alley could supply them. To put the matter this way is of course to parody it (although not outrageously, as Evelyn Waugh's *Diaries* of the 1920s and Martin Green's *Children of the Sun* between them make clear, and anyway it is difficult to parody the kinds of self-parodying people who occur in their pages).[3] More important is the fact that the vast majority of those who jigged and hopped and crossed their hands over their knees in or out of time to 'Nagasaki', 'Has Anybody Seen My Girl?', and the rest, had no real interest in jazz as such. Nat Gonella is on record as saying that when he went to hear Louis Armstrong at the Palladium in 1930 the fashionable audience left in droves. (Gonella, a genuine enthusiast, was so enraged by this response to his hero that he did his best to trip up those who passed him on their way to the exit.)

Nevertheless, for most writers in the 1920s ragtime equalled jazz equalled decadence. Eliot's 'Shakespeherien Rag' ('It's so elegant|So intelligent') echoes eerily round the room of the neurasthenic, bored wife of 'A Game of Chess', and the syncopated speech-rhythms of *Sweeney Agonistes*, as well as the song 'Under the bamboo tree', imply a world whose devitalized routines ('You'd be bored.|Birth, and copulation, and death') can be known and judged through its devotion to ragtime, which, for Eliot, meant jazz.[4] We know this is so because in 1924 he consulted Arnold Bennett about a 'drama of modern life (furnished flat sort of people)' which he wanted to write 'in a rhythmic prose "perhaps with certain things in it accentuated with drum beats"'.[5] Three years later Bennett wrote to Eliot to ask what had happened 'to that Jazz play'.[6] (A fragment, called 'Wanna Go Home Baby', had in fact been published in *Criterion* for January 1927).

[2] See Rex Harris, *Jazz* (Harmondsworth, 1952), pp. 73–74.

[3] See *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, edited by Michael Davie (Harmondsworth, 1979; this edition makes minor revisions from the London edition of 1976), especially pp. 155–303, passim; Martin Green, *Children of the Sun* (New York, 1976).

[4] In *Recollections* (London, 1984), Geoffrey Grigson claims to have heard T. S. Eliot sing 'Frankie and Johnny', but I do not suggest that this amounts to evidence that Eliot had an interest in jazz.

[5] *The Journals of Arnold Bennett, 1921–28*, edited by Newman Flower (London, 1973), p. 52.

[6] *The Letters of Arnold Bennett*, edited by James Hepburn, 3 vols (London, 1966), III, 124.

You would expect attitudes to change with the coming of a younger and politically radical group of poets, and of course they did. What had been seen as decadent now became subversive. Yet for the writers of the 1930s jazz wasn't the influence it might and perhaps should have been. Auden, for example, never seems to have been much interested in it. True, a number of his songs and the *Dance of Death* show how excited he was by the cabaret and revue work of the Weimar Republic which he had had a chance to experience at first hand, and some of that work was undoubtedly influenced by American jazz. But once you have taken note of his approval of such song-writers as Cole Porter and Rogers and Hart, and of the fact that he includes a generous selection of spirituals and bar-room and chain-gang songs in his great *Oxford Book of Light Verse* of 1938 (they include 'John Henry', 'Stagolee', 'Frankie and Johnny', 'Casey Jones', and 'This Train'), you have exhausted the matter of Auden's interest in the music. When Geoffrey Grigson commissioned various writers to contribute to *The Arts To-day* (London, 1935) he invited Edward Crankshaw to write about 'Music'. Crankshaw's piece avoids any mention of jazz, even though it aims to be as up-to-date as possible. At one point in his essay he notes that 'Mr Constant Lambert in his admirable book was the first to point . . . out' the parallel between the progress of Schönberg and James Joyce (p. 174). He does not, however, note Lambert's remark that Duke Ellington is probably one of the finest and most influential of modern composers and arrangers. Even Louis MacNeice, the one poet you might think would be much interested in some aspects of jazz (not least in the clubs where it could be found uncertainly surviving, and where late drinking, the conducting of illicit affairs, and a general air of cigarette-ash bohemianism provided the kind of atmosphere that seems made for him), uses the word in a vague, if vaguely approbatory, way.

But at this point I need to say that I am not at all sure just how much jazz any of the writers of the 1930s could have heard or of what they could have been aware. It is not simply that confusion over the word was still widespread. (Two important details about the first sound-picture, *The Jazz Singer*, are that Al Jolson wasn't black and he couldn't or anyway didn't sing jazz.)[7] More important, perhaps, is the fact that if you were in England it was never very easy to hear American musicians playing the new music. In the first place, from the mid-1930s there was a Musicians Union ban on visiting musicians playing with their own groups, which meant that any American jazzman booked to appear in Britain would have to be accompanied by British Musicians, an understandable move to preserve jobs but a disaster in that it led the majority of jazzmen to stay away. (Still, Fats Waller came to England in 1939 and recorded a half-hour programme for BBC television, with a group that included the trombonist George Chisholm. Unfortunately

[7] *The Jazz Singer*, the first example of a film to have sound on disc, came to London in 1928. Two reels were accompanied by sound, and on them Jolson sang 'Mammy' and 'Sonny Boy'. The film toured the provinces during the following two years.

the BBC either lost or destroyed the recording.) In the second place, records of the jazz bands were not easy to come by, although those who lived in the port towns fared better than most, if only because visiting American seamen would frequently bring records ashore with them, for barter or sale. This helps to explain why cities such as Belfast, Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow have always been jazz strongholds, and places from which some of the best British bands and musicians have come.

All this means that anyone wanting to listen to jazz in the 1930s, whether in clubs, on records, or sitting by the wireless in kitchens in the lonely fens, would not have an easy time of it, and that what they would hear might well be no more than a parody of the real thing, especially if it came from such dance bands as those led by Jack Hylton, Ambrose, Henry Hall, and Ray Fox, which were nationally famous, had regular time on the radio, and made many records.

> They were in almost no sense 'jazz' bands, but about every sixth piece they made a 'hot number', in which the one or two men in the band who could play jazz would be heard. The classic 'hot number' was 'Tiger Rag': . . . Harry Roy had a band-within-a-band called the Tiger-Ragamuffins. Nat Gonella's stage show had a toy tiger lying on the grand piano. Trombonists and tuba-players became adept at producing the traditional tiger growl. I found these hot numbers so exciting that I would listen to hours of dance music in order to catch them when they came.[8]

This is Philip Larkin, in the introduction (p. 2) to *All What Jazz* (London, 1972), and he goes on to tell of how he slowly began to build up a record collection which could 'bear all the enthusiasm usually directed at more established arts. There was nothing odd about this. It was happening to boys all over Europe and America. It just didn't get into the papers'. At Oxford, he continues, 'my education grew. I met people who knew more about jazz than I did, and had more records, and who could even parallel my ecstasies with their own' (p. 3). Larkin names no names, but among the Oxford near-contemporaries who shared his enthusiasms were Kingsley Amis and John Wain, and the 'ecstasies' of all three were to spill over into poetry and prose. There will be more to say about this, but as a way into discussing the poems I need to ask why it was that this *particular* enthusiasm was happening, if not 'to boys all over Europe and America', at least to Larkin and many of his contemporaries.

The most obvious explanation is, of course, that jazz recommended itself to Larkin's generation precisely because it wasn't seen as an established art. Since Auden's generation (among whom there would have been some who taught Larkin's) had no great interest in the music, beyond annexing its name and vaguely-understood contents in the cause of subversive social and political stances, the way was clear for Larkin and his contemporaries to

[8] For a fuller, more sympathetic account of the frustrations of would-be British jazz musicians of the 1930s, see the interviews conducted by Richard Sudhalter, under the title of 'Yesterday's Men: The Generation Gap in British Jazz', in *Jazz Now*, edited by Roger Cotterall (London, 1976).

strike a rebellious pose through their adoption of jazz as an art form. If they did not want to claim that much for it they could at least justify an interest in jazz because it was 'unpretentious'. This unpretentiousness is, in fact, one of the most widely-presumed characteristics of jazz and its exponents. A story (almost certainly apocryphal) which jazz-buffs of Larkin's generation never tire of telling is of Louis Armstrong (or, in some versions, Fats Waller), replying to the inevitably white, upper-class lady's enquiry as to what swing is (in some versions swing becomes rhythm): 'Lady, if you has to ask, you jest ain't got it.' And when jazz musicians tune up (usually to A natural) they famously remark, as they finish adjusting slide or string, 'near enough for jazz'.

It is worth noting that this self-deprecatory element, which could be found among jazz musicians and which, in America at least, had a great deal to do with the fact that most of the musicians were black and working for and in white men's clubs, hotels, and restaurants, becomes one of the most remarked-on elements of the generation of Movement poets. This may also explain why Larkin and others so took against Parker and the jazz musicians of *his* generation, simply because they refused to be 'unpretentious': that is, they were prepared to be aggressive champions of their music, to take pride in their great technical mastery, to scorn their (often white) audiences, to play unfamiliar tunes or radically alter familiar ones. Parker's creative or, some would say, destructive treatment of 'How High the Moon' is an obvious example.

Jazz also recommended itself simply because it was the almost private/secret possession of the young. The fact that the records were hard to come by meant that they acquired an almost legendary status; labels and matrix numbers were memorized, rare buys were jealously guarded. The fact that the wax 78 rpms were frail, easily scratched and broken, added to their rarity value. In general there was the heady feeling that in learning to appreciate jazz you were coming in on a sub-culture. Writing as someone who joined this sub-culture as late as the early 1950s I can speak with the authority of one who recalls the thrill of buying a black-Brunswick-label recording of the Hot Six playing 'Potato-Head Blues' which *must*, so my elders and betters told me, have been a pirated version. I can also recall the thrill of joining my school's Rhythm Club (I don't suppose there was a school in the country which, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, failed to have such a club) and hearing my very first jazz record: Dizzie Gillespie's 'Cognac Blues'. The music itself meant little, the title everything. It suggested a society of dimly-lit cafés, a night-life of sex and poetry, and, perhaps most importantly, an escape from the Light-Programme diet of Patti Page asking 'How Much is that Doggie in the Window?' and Donald Peers requesting 'Red Roses for a Blue Lady'. I bring my own experience in at this point in order to suggest that for at least twenty years (roughly from 1936 to 1956) jazz music was the music you could, if you were young, associate with mild

rebelliousness, with striking the father dead, with an argot known only to the *cognoscenti*.[9]

There was also the fact that jazz became increasingly admired by those who could identify it with a mild form of socialism. It was, after all, the music of the down-trodden, and was therefore ethnically respectable; there were those who claimed to hear in it the voice of the oppressed slave striking back at his or her oppressor (for the great Blues singers, Ma Rainey and, pre-eminently, Bessie Smith, were idolized by my generation and I suspect by Larkin's). There is a particularly nauseating moment in Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1957) when Archie Rice recalls an old negress singing her heart out, and the idea that jazz simply (very simply) spoke equally for joy, heartache, and deprivation was one of the more enduring myths of the period I am now considering. This is not to say that the music lacked social content, or that it was devoid of political comment; but it is to say that one of the motives behind the identification with jazz was that it could be seen as expressive of the admirer's political and social radicalism. It is worth adding that, although Larkin (before his comparatively late and almost parodic lurch into Thatcherism) seems never to have been prepared to declare a political point of view, Amis and Wain were milk-and-water Fabians for whom an identification with jazz might well seem appropriate to their political positions. More generally, and perhaps more seriously, jazz could be seen as the 'people's' music, a possibility which would have been strengthened by the meetings of British men-at-arms with their American counterparts, many of whom were black and some of whom were the very musicians the British had worshipped and imitated from afar. Support for and interest in jazz therefore could be seen as or adopted as a sign of political solidarity, and it is no accident that during the 1940s and 1950s the *William Morris Society Bulletin* should have carried jazz material.

To admire jazz could also be seen as a sign of intellectual daring, or of wanting to shock the bourgeoisie. The post-war euophoria will have had something to do with this heady determination of clearing out the old in order to make way for the new. After all, it *was* daring to prefer Armstrong to 'filthy Mozart', or to pretend to do so, or, more seriously, to find room for both. In addition it became another means of scorning the insular philistinism of previous generations. Jazz was eminently acceptable on the Left Bank. France had been the one country in Europe prior to the war where jazz and jazz musicians were made very welcome. Albert Nicholas, Bill Coleman, Sidney Bechet (who had first toured in a revue in 1925 which included Josephine Baker), Tommy Ladnier, and others had all made at least temporary homes in Paris; and Paris was famously the adopted home of

[9] John Wain's novel *Strike the Father Dead* (London, 1962) deals with the rebellious son of a university professor, who, despite his father's wishes, becomes a jazz pianist. In *Owning Up* (London, 1965; reprinted Harmondsworth, 1970), George Melly produces an hilarious autobiographical account of his years as a jazz singer with Mick Mulligan and his Magnolia Jazz Band, and also provides a very full glossary of jazz argot.

Django Reinhardt and the Hot Club. After the war many of these musicians returned. Jazz was now the approved music of the literary avant-garde. Sartre and Camus regularly and casually mentioned jazz musicians and quoted the titles of their 'classic' recordings. In 1947 Henri Matisse issued a series of lithographs named, simply, *Jazz*, and although the inspiration for the title had less to do with Matisse's interest in the music than in the fact that he was responding to a renewal of hope, of light, of freshness, this in turn meant that jazz could be identified as the carefree music which dispelled the gloom and shabbiness of war-shattered Europe. It really *was* Europe which took to the music. In Paris Claude Luter's band gained extra *cachet* because Bechet so often played and recorded with it, but it attracted large audiences on its own account. There was the Dutch Swing College Band, the White Eagle New Orleans Band of Berlin, there were bands aplenty spread across Belgium; and so on.

In addition there was now a steady growth of literature on the subject. In Britain *Jazz Journal* was an established and respected magazine, *The Melody Maker* gave regular and increasing space to jazz commentators, Eric Hobsbawm wrote a jazz column in the *New Statesman and Nation* under the pseudonym of Francis Newton: Frankie Newton was a negro jazz trumpeter who had died young, of tuberculosis, just before the war. Then there were the books. Rex Harris's *Jazz* was first published by Penguin (as a Pelican book) in 1952, and by 1957 was into its fifth edition. André Hodeir's highfalutin *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence* was translated into English in the early 1950s. As the decade wore on biographies, criticism, and general histories piled up on the bookstalls. Jazz, it seemed, was everywhere.

Yet this is an exaggeration. For although in Britain any number of jazz bands, professional and semi-professional, were being formed, and although most towns had a jazz club where local bands could perform each week and where there would be occasional guest nights featuring out-of-town musicians, these were invariably British. The Musicians Union did not relax its ban on foreign groups until 1956. Before then, if you wanted to hear the great and not-so-great American bands, you had to cross either the English Channel or the Irish Sea. (The *Melody Maker* ran excursion specials for those wanting to hear live such orchestras as those of Woody Herman and Stan Kenton when they visited Ireland.) Then, in 1956, the Musicians Union decided on a policy of exchanges. American bands could come to England on condition that English bands were allowed to tour the United States. They got Freddy Randall and his band and we got Louis Armstrong and his All Stars. You would think that this would have increased jazz's popularity. Quite the reverse: 1956 marked the beginning of the end for the mass popular appeal of jazz. There were still many tours to come, jazz-band balls and concerts at the Festival Hall and halls throughout the country (nearly all of them sell-outs in both senses of the word), and the traddy-pop boom was as yet some years off. But George Melly recalls that in 1956 he recorded a

'novelty number' of the 1920s, 'My Canary's Got Circles Under His Eyes', which was a total flop (it deserved to be), and that the week it was released a 'boy' called Tommy Steele released a record called 'Rock with the Cavemen' (*Owning Up*, Chapter 11). A new kind of do-it-yourself music, born from the skiffle bands which themselves had been born out of the jazz bands, was on the way.

Jazz had always been a do-it-yourself music, or so legend reported. The negroes of the deep south made guitars out of cigar-boxes and broomsticks, bought reach-me-down brass instruments from hock shops; and away they went. Of course, it wasn't at all like that, but this appropriate falsehood made it easier for young people in Britain (predominantly male) to buy up odd instruments and learn to play them (a new brass instrument could easily be 'improved' by a few well-placed dents). Philip Larkin says that after an early and brief flirtation with drumming he became a listener only, and he remarks that only one person in his circle at Oxford could play a musical instrument: the saxophone. I do not know whether this was typical of his class but it certainly wasn't typical of his generation, for many young working-class men were learning to play instruments so that they could copy the bands and music they loved.

The first British jazz bands were therefore almost entirely made up of working-class musicians, and they continued to be so throughout the 1950s. There were exceptions: Humphrey Lyttleton, of Eton and the Guards, was the most spectacular; and everyone knew that Chris Barber and Johnny Dankworth had been to the Royal College of Music, and that Sandy Brown (almost certainly the most original talent among British musicians) was Scottish and formidable in argument. On the other hand, when he played he usually wore a vest or dirty old grey V-neck sweater and in this respect looked little different from the musicians who made up his and countless other home-grown bands. The only exception to this, for a while at least, was Ken Colyer, who had a penchant for requiring his band to wear evening dress, as an act of homage to King Oliver's bands of the 1920s whose music he idolized and rather beautifully reproduced. But this did not last for long, and for most of the time his band, too, was wearing the classless uniform of cords, check-shirts or sweaters, and cracked leather shoes (they were sometimes replaced by 'desert boots') which like the rest of the outfit typically came from Millett's or the Army and Navy Stores.

For a while, at least, classlessness might even have seemed to be the crux of the matter. Everyone dressed more or less the same way and went to the same places to hear live jazz and danced in the same manner and followed the same bands and used the same forms of transport; for all of these reasons jazz fans were keen not to be identified as hooray Henries. 'Did we really talk like this,|With such absurd self-consciousness?' The question John Mole puts, wonderingly, in his charming poem 'The Jazzmen' (*The Instruments* (London, 1971)) is directed at the fact that he and his schoolfriends, jazz

aficionados all, did their best to disguise their public-school accents by adopting the jazz patois, speaking, for example, of 'cats' who 'grooved'. They may have been 'Young gentlemen from public school', a minor one, 'deft at turning out a bore', but they knew that the music they loved was rooted and flowered in the most underprivileged of all levels of American society; if they wanted to hear it in England ('Humph at the Conway, Ken at Mac's'), Eel Pie Island, where Sandy Brown's band played to vast, delirious audiences, or anywhere else, for that matter, it was advisable to put on a protective voice along with the protective uniform.

Yet as Mole's poem reveals, middle-class and upper-class boys were now not merely listening to the music; they were trying to play it. He and his friends formed a jazz-band:

> Honour, though, our little clique,
> That dinned the Music Room each week,
> Us practising musicians who
> Thumped as grossly as we blew;
> Authentic every turgid sound
> Issuing from that hallowed ground.

For the cornet-player authenticity meant taking pains 'Not to sound slick like Harry James'. For Mole himself it meant learning the classic Alphonse Picou solo on 'High Society'. Mole still plays clarinet, and in fact you could easily make up a jazz band from the writers of our generation who learnt to play the music they loved.[10] Throughout the 1950s there was an annual Universities Jazz-Band championship, and jazz meant 'traditional' that is, non-modern, jazz. Oxford in 1957 had a very George-Lewis-like outfit, the Loughborough Colleges band managed a fair imitation of Eddie Condon's group, the band I played in took Bunk Johnson as hero, and so on.

The point about all this is that the amorphous classlessness of the immediate post-war days was giving ground before the growing confidence of public-school and grammar-school products who were quite likely to be using traditional jazz as a stick with which to beat not only modernism (the three Ps) but also the vague radicalism which had earlier seemed an integral element in jazz appreciation. I need to tread carefully here. Some of my best friends are jazzmen and most of those are on the left of the political spectrum. Some went to public school and others, like myself, came out of the grammar school system. Still others were products of secondary moderns and some of them were and are to the political right. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that as the 1950s wore on so traditional jazz became increasingly identified as 'apolitical' (that is, conservative) and that some of its eloquent champions emerged as themselves increasingly conservative: which is why they rejected the newer jazz, for that signified a new-found confidence and aggressiveness

[10] Here is one such possible jazz-band: Humphrey Carpenter, brass bass; Roy Fisher, piano; Norton Smith, banjo; Russell Davies, trombone; Douglas Dunn, tenor sax; John Mole, clarinet; John Lucas, cornet; Terry Hawkes, drums.

on the part of black people which was part of the story of the emergence of black consciousness in America. And in Britain? I think it fair to say that only one kind of modern jazz ever really caught on here, and that, significantly enough, its adherents were working-class (Glasgow and London were the centres where it grew). They admired Parker but they imitated the 'cool' jazz associated with the Gerry Mulligan quartet, and their uniform featured button-down shirts and Italian suits; as far as I know, just because this jazz was working-class it was never much written about.

Traditional jazz, by contrast, never lacked for articulate middle-class supporters, who could look back to the early 'innocent' days as composing a kind of golden world before the fall into modernism and Birdland, Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Charlie Parker and, worse and worse, John Coltrane and free form. I have to say that the jazz I love best belongs to the period stretching from early Armstrong through to the death of Fats Waller in 1943 (this period does, after all, contain a mass of beautiful and exciting music), but I know that the social-political context in which jazz exists, at least in America, made it inevitable that musicians such as Parker and Miles Davis and their followers would turn their backs (often literally) on audiences who asked for more of the same and who, as they rightly saw, essentially wanted black musicians to go on being Uncle Toms to condescending white audiences. The uncomprehending contempt directed at modernism by Kingsley Amis is, therefore, an essential part of the condescension with which he gives his approval to the more traditional forms of jazz, as in his 'Farewell Blues', a pastiche of Hardy's great poem 'Friends Beyond':

> Bongo, sitar, 'cello, flute, electric piano, bass guitar,
> Training Orchestra, Research Team, Workshop, Group, Conservatoire,
> *Square Root*, *Nexus*, *Barbaresque*, *Distortions*, *Voltage* — bloody row,
> For Louis Armstrong, Mildred Bailey, Walter Page and Sidney Catlett
> lie in Brunswick Churchyard now.
>
> Trumpets gelded, drums contingent, saxophones that bleat or bawl,
> Keyless, barless, poor-man's Boulez, improvising on fuck-all,
> Far beyond what feeling, reason, even mother wit allow,
> While Mugsy Spanier, Floyd O'Brien, Sterling Bose and Henry Allen
> lie in Decca Churchyard now.
>
> Dead's the note we loved that swelled within us, made us gasp and stare,
> Simple joy and simple sadness thrashing the astounded air;
> What replaced them no one asked for, but it turned up anyhow,
> And Coleman Hawkins, Johnny Hodges, Bessie Smith and Pee Wee Russell
> lie in Okeh churchyard now.
>
> (*Collected Poems, 1944–1979* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 152)

A revealing point about this poem is that Amis's adherence to traditional jazz, which had earlier made him seem faintly radical, can now go hand-in-hand with a tetchy conservatism. 'Farewell Blues' reads almost as a parody piece, its snarling, ignorant dismissal of the new music very similar to

the peevish anger with which Somerset Maugham tried to dismiss the young iconoclastic post-war writers among whom was, of course, Kingsley Amis. Another point is that in most of its claims and assertions the poem is plainly wrong. When Amis says that 'no one' asked for the new music he's talking nonsense. The fact that he didn't want it hardly counts against the fact that Charlie Parker, for example, became a hero to millions of young blacks in America and to a sizeable number of people in Britain. The gap that Amis tries to open up between then and now is made ludicrous as soon as you realize that Parker's music, as he himself always acknowledged, owed a great deal to the examples of Coleman Hawkins and Johnny Hodges.[11] Larkin, more astute and truthful than Amis, had grudgingly to admit the fact of Parker's genius when, reviewing a Parker memorial album, he wrote:

> It is Parker's solos that carry these records and have caused an alteration in the course of jaz. Granted that his technique and musical instinct for innovation were unrivalled, what was he *like*? His talent was indivisible; one cannot say that he would have been better if he had played more simply or with fewer rhythmic eccentricities; these are features of the wild, bubbling freedom that characterises him, and that some say earned him his nickname. But freedom from what? As one listens to Parker spiralling away 'out of this world', as the phrase goes, one can answer 'humanity', and that is a fatal thing for any artist, or any art, to be separated from. (*All What Jazz*, p. 96)

On the other hand, the two writers are not far apart in their prejudices. What Larkin here means by 'humanity' can be glossed by Amis's phrase 'simple joy and simple sadness'. Jazzmen and women are then a kind of stand-in for a contented peasantry in Amis's vision of an ideal past where music is the token of uncomplicated lives, uncomplicated relations. But you have to shed a great deal of history before you can arrive at the belief that there was anything simple about the sadness of Bessie Smith or the joy of Louis Armstrong ('Laughin' Louis' was an invention of the Mafia, who forced the great genius of the music into endless excruciatingly embarrassing roles, on stage, on screen, and on record, because he was good business — at least as long as he kept laughing, kept on pumping out the simple joy).

Like Amis and Larkin, John Wain's preference is for the more traditional forms of jazz. Nevertheless, Wain's 'Music on the Water' (subtitled 'to Bill Coleman in Paris') is alert to some of the historical tragedies out of which jazz emerged:

> Out at sea, the slave ships were coming.
> Sound reached out across water:
> dead-smack of corpse, gull-scream,
> chop of the settler's axe, gun-crack and
> whip-crack: in the steamy fields
> the black backs bend, the long dark song goes up:
> the American earth, no longer Eden:
> and sound moves out across water.[12]

[11] For Parker's debts and sources, see Ross Russell, *Bird Lives: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie 'Yardbird' Parker* (London, 1973), especially pp. 58–60.

[12] 'Music on the Water' was first published in *Letters to Five Artists* (London, 1969) and reprinted in *Poems 1949–79* (Londn, 1980), p. 109.

Unfortunately, as this passage illustrates, Wain's poem is not much more than a plodding Janet-and-John rehash of a part of American history; his efforts to characterize Coleman's music, and that of Django, with whom Coleman sometimes played in Paris, is clogged with the same kind of clichés as deaden *Strike the Father Dead*, his well-meaning novel about jazz musicians ('I brought up my hands and let them fall on to the keys. Instinctively, they formed a chord, . . . a lovely rich chord, which welled up out of the piano and rolled out, in ever-widening circles, till it filled the whole world' (p. 52)). I have to say that I have never known a jazz musician who talks and thinks as Wain's are made to do.

In their different ways both Amis and Wain want to make absolute claim for the jazz they like. If this feels less than convincing it is because you realize that they aren't in fact in a position to speak with the kind of inwardness, or knowingness, that they pretend. Their writings about jazz therefore create some decidedly inappropriate falsehoods. Philip Larkin, on the other hand, from whose marvellous poem 'For Sidney Bechet' the phrase comes, knows how to keep his distance while at the same time finding the right way to praise the music he loves.

> The note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
> Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
> And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,
>
> Building for some a legendary Quarter
> Of Balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,
> Everyone making love and going shares —
>
> Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storeyvilles
> Others may license, grouping round their chairs
> Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced
>
> Far above rubies) to pretend their fads,
> While scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed,
> Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.
>
> On me your voice falls as they say love should,
> Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City
> Is where your speech alone is understood,
>
> And greeted as the natural noise of good,
> Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.
>
> (*The Whitsun Weddings* (London, 1964), p. 16)

I do not know which particular record of Bechet's Larkin may have had in mind when he wrote the poem, and it is entirely possible that the description of 'the note', although it accurately catches Bechet's great powers of wide-vibrato glissand, is not meant to refer to a specific track. Nevertheless, it is worth remarking that on at least two occasions Larkin picked out 'Blue Horizon' as one of his favourites: 'six choruses of slow blues in which Bechet climbs without interruption or hurry from low to upper register, his clarinet tone at first thick and throbbing, then soaring like Melba in an extraordinary

blend of lyricism and power that constituted the unique Bechet voice, commanding attention the instant it sounded'.[13]

The title of that great recording is appropriate to the meaning of Larkin's poem, which is after all about travelling across to an entirely imaginary New Orleans, the Crescent City where jazz first began and where, so various legends had it, the good times endlessly rolled. Hence the attractions of the Latin Quarter, its fantastic creole freedoms held in check by 'Oh, play that thing!', a phrase that can be heard on one of the classic jazz records, King Oliver's 'Sugar Foot Stomp', where it is exuberantly shouted by banjoist Bud Scott, after three choruses of the master's muted cornet and as a lead into a joyous ensemble closing sequence. In the poem the phrase, placed as it is, sounds with a rueful self-mockery which reminds us of the distance between the world of those 'antique negroes' (to quote from another Larkin poem that alludes to King Oliver) and the fact that Larkin, the jazz-buff, is listening on his own to the music that seems to hold out the promise of making love and going shares.

New Orleans was also famous for the fact that in 1917 the police closed down Storeyville, the red-light district where many of the early jazz musicians were hired to entertain punters waiting their turn with the Sporting-House girls. In scripture it is, of course, a virtuous woman who is priced far above rubies. Larkin's joke testifies both to the fact that some of the Storeyville brothels were extremely lavishly got-up and very expensive, and that the solitary listener can in his licentious imagination (but only there) reissue licences to the sporting houses. The brilliant image of the scholars *manqués* 'wrapped up in personnels like old plaids' points to the efforts of rival jazz historians and discographers to put a name to each musician taking part in the early recording sessions (they often went unnamed by the record companies concerned).

In the 1950s these attributions often brought the historians into sharp conflict and provided them with a no-doubt welcome opportunity to assert their erudition on record-sleeves and in the columns of the musical press. In short, Larkin evokes, generously and wittily, a number of very English preoccupations with a city and its music which have attained the status of myth. It is this which saves the poem from falling into sentimentality at the end, for, although at first glance 'the natural noise of good' may seem uncomfortably close to 'simple joy and simple sorrow', in fact Larkin is aware, as Amis isn't, of the mythicizing qualities of that 'enormous yes'. It is another appropriate falsehood, and because he knows this to be so he is free to indulge a dream of a world free of 'long-haired grief and scored pity'. In the 1950s 'long-hair' was a term of genial contempt directed by jazzmen at

[13] *All What Jazz*, p. 29 (see also p. 152). The record was cut in 1944, by which time Bechet was more regularly playing the soprano saxophone, at which he was the acknowledged, unapproachable master, and on which his power and attack frequently disconcerted all but the most determined of trumpet players.

classical or 'serious' musicians. Larkin brilliantly puns on this to imply that Bechet's music cancels a world of sorrow, of Niobe and her misfortunes; and, in a further pun, that such improvised (that is, unscored) music dispels the deep-hatched lines of pity and suffering that mark her woes. But this dream can last for only so long as the record itself. The poem has about it the neat containment of the kind of jazz number that fits perfectly into the limitations of a 78 rpm record.

Once Larkin had written his poem it became inevitable, I think, that other poets would try to pay tribute to the virtues of their jazz heroes, or to empathize with their hard-luck lives. This will explain Michael Longley's 'Words for Jazz Perhaps', a sequence of poems contained in his first volume, *No Continuing City*, in which he writes of Fats Waller, Bud Freeman, Bessie Smith, and Bix Biederbecke, just as it will explain Douglas Dunn's rather better 'Billie 'n' Me', about the tragic life and death of Billie Holiday. 'And silent now', it ends, 'As the saxophones in Harlem pawnshops, | Your voice that meant how tough love is'.[14] There are other such poems, but it is hardly necessary to list them here. Instead, I want to close by mentioning a far more original poem than any so far discussed: Roy Fisher's 'The Thing About Joe Sullivan'. This is the title-poem of a volume Fisher brought out in 1978, and it has been subsequently republished in his *Poems 1955–80* ((London, 1980), p. 52).

Joe Sullivan was a negro pianist who, having learned much of his craft from Earl Hines, began his career with Eddie Condon before branching out into solo work and occasional recording sessions and work with other groups. (There is an affectionate account of him in Condon's *We Called It Music* (London, 1948; Corgi Paperback, 1962).) Jazzmen have always had a great respect for Sullivan, yet he never achieved the fame of other, less talented, musicians, perhaps because he never stayed for long with any one group; this was almost certainly due to his restless desire to push his music further, to test himself against harder obstacles. Sullivan, in other words, was not a 'one style' man; I imagine it was this which attracted Fisher, himself a talented pianist and very fine poet, to him. It is significant that Fisher is more aware of developments in post-war American poetry than most English poets, Charles Tomlinson and Donald Davie excepted, and both in style and subject-matter he is *sui generis*. 'The Thing About Joe Sullivan' is both a poem in praise of an outstanding pianist, a subtle probing of his art, and at the same time an example of how to write the kind of poem that, perhaps like Sullivan's own music, starts from certainties and moves off into more exploratory and tentative statements.

> The pianist Joe Sullivan,
> jamming sound against idea
>
> hard as it can go
> florid and dangerous

[14] Dunn, *The Happier Life* (London, 1972), p. 34; 'Words for Jazz Perhaps' is now available in Michael Longley's *Poems 1963–1983* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 46–47.

slams at the beat, or hovers,
drumming, along its spikes;

in his time almost the only
one of them to ignore

the chance of easing down,
walking it leisurely,

he'll strut, with gambling shapes,
underpinning by James P.,

amble, and stride over
gulfs of his own leaving, perilously

toppling octaves down to where
the chords grow fat again.

In jazz talk 'to jam' is to improvise, and in a sense the poem is improvising with possibilities of language and rhythm that Sullivan's own daring seem to have required of his admirer. You have only to compare this language, and the handling of pause, of pace, with the passage I quoted from *Strike the Father Dead* to sense how authentic Fisher's recreation of Sullivan's manner is. Yet it isn't just recreation that's at stake here; for the poem is an act of considering, a way of thinking about and enacting the daring perilousness of improvisation, while recognizing that there must always be the possibility of control. Thus when Sullivan struts, 'with gambling shapes', he is both playing and playing with the kind of music called a 'strut' (or, as variation, a 'cakewalk'),[15] which accompanied or summoned up negro mimicry of the white man's way of walking or dancing, and at the same time gambling with ideas that might not come off were it not for the fact that he has not entirely forsaken the solid left-hand rhythm he learned from listening to James P. Johnson, the acknowledged king of 'stride' piano. As a result Sullivan can 'stride' over 'gulfs of his own leaving' (the enjambment reinforces the stride), and to do this is both an act of great daring and a way of employing artistic means that offer him a firmness of purpose.

Towards the end of the poem Fisher brings himself in. The thing about Joe Sullivan, he says, is his mood:

a feeling violent and ordinary

that runs in among standard forms so
wrapped up in clarity

that fingers following his
through figures that sound obvious

find corners everywhere,
marks of invention, wakefulness;

[15] This is unavoidably loose. The terms were created by negroes and perhaps especially by negro musicians, and they seem to have been applied to the kinds of dances or even ways of walking which negroes associated with whites, and which they guyed outrageously in their own dances. But then 'strut' and 'cakewalk' became incorporated into the titles of numbers that were meant (and played) in a more straightforward manner, as, for example, 'Struttin' With Some Barbecue' and 'Cakewalking Babies'.

the rapid and perverse
tracks that ordinary feelings

make when they get driven
hard enough against time.

The strange hesitancy of the poem's title is now justified as Fisher more deeply and personally explores Sullivan's way with music, his use of form to take risks that threaten to become formless but which are always rescued by a shaping purpose that discovers itself through the very act of creation, through the artist's mixture of daring and determination not to waste or idle with his art. At the same time he can place his trust in hard-won techniques which, traditional themselves (in the sense that Sullivan was brought up in the era of, and learnt from, a great generation of jazz pianists, especially Johnson and Hines), allow him, indeed require him, to move forward, tracking feelings that become eloquent with ideas as they are 'driven | hard enough against time': that is, the time a tune takes to be played, the musical time it is played in, and the time in which the artist lives, all of which form resistant mediums which his restless spirit must challenge.

Fisher's deep, inward understanding of how an art form cannot stand still makes 'The Thing About Joe Sullivan' not merely a far better poem than 'Farewell Blues' or several of the same breed; it also shows a far more tactful and alert awareness of how we all must live in time. Not, of course, that this will seem a recommendation to those for whom the three Ps spell the death of civilization.