

# “Feather’s Nest:” A Collection Exemplifying the Diverse and Prolific Career of Jazz Authority Leonard Feather

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Leonard Feather (1914-1994), one of the foremost jazz authorities, was highly a prolific jazz critic, journalist, historian, radio and television personality, pianist, composer, publicist, and record producer. He was active in nearly every aspect of jazz and is one of the music’s major figures and chroniclers, and this collection represents a small sampling of the various types of work Feather produced in his sixty year career. For years, Feather had a regular column in *Downbeat* entitled “Feather’s Nest.” I consider this collection to be a “nest” of sorts, containing a small sample of Feather’s literary and musical progeny.

My interest in Leonard Feather began during my MA work at the University of Idaho, where I wrote my thesis on a body of his work known as the Blindfold Tests, two of which are included in this collection. My scholarly academic interest in Feather continues, and he is the focus on one of my dissertation chapters. Feather intrigues me for several reasons, but primarily because he was successful and active in jazz in just about every way a person could be. He was an extremely complex person, with at times contradictory goals and philosophies. He decried subjectivity in jazz criticism, but he could be extremely biased in his writing, especially when he had conflicting interests in the subject of his work. For example, even though he felt criticism should be objective, he would write reviews of musicians he produced albums for or review recordings of songs he composed. Feather cared deeply about social inequalities, and worked tirelessly towards reducing gender and racial bias and discrimination. While he meant to reduce social inequalities, some of his writing unintentionally reinforced stereotypes and existing biases. As a jazz critic myself, Feather is a model to me in terms of his output, quality of his writing, and

the influence and importance of his work in chronicling jazz history. On the other hand, Feather is an example of how not to do criticism, especially in terms of writing about subjects and people one has conflicts of interests with. He was a great salesman, both for jazz, and for himself, tirelessly pitching story ideas to editors, album ideas to record companies, and selling jazz fans or potential jazz fans around the world the greatness of jazz music.

While not representative of the total diversity of Feather's output (many materials I would like to include in this collection, such as recordings of his television and radio broadcasts are unpublished and/or unavailable) the materials I chose to include in this collection reflect several of Feather's various activities. These include his work as a journalist, historian, critic, liner note annotator and record producer.

The main achievement of Feather's career was as a writer. During my research at the University of Idaho, which holds his personal collection, I discovered he was published over 300 times per year, every year, for a number of decades. A significant contribution are his Encyclopedias of Jazz. Encompassing seven volumes, these encyclopedias contain a wealth of reference material: thousands of musician biographies, hundreds of photographs, lists of albums and books, etc. In addition, they also contain essays by Feather on a wide variety of subjects such as brief histories of jazz, musical descriptions of jazz style, articles on significant events in jazz, and expansions of his work for various periodicals. This collection contains five of the seven volumes of Feather's encyclopedias, all of which are first editions. Feather also wrote one of the first jazz surveys, entitled *The Book of Jazz: A Guide to the Entire Field*, which is included in this collection. In addition, this collection includes two collections of essays and interviews from the mid and late 1970s. One of the most useful books for someone writing on Feather is his

autobiography, which details many of the most important relationships in his life and many of his most important and influential projects and achievements.

In addition to writing several books, Feather wrote for just about every jazz magazine that existed during his lifetime, including *Melody Maker*, *Metronome*, *Downbeat*, and *JazzTimes*, among several others. His work was also translated into Swedish, Italian and other languages. He was also the chief jazz critic for the *Los Angeles Times* from the middle 1960s until his death. His writing in periodicals took various form, and included artist profiles, interview, album and concert reviews, columns, and think pieces. In his periodical writing Feather acted as a journalist, historian and critic, helping to expose jazz readers to musicians and music, as well as giving his opinion as to the worth and artistic and aesthetic value of that music. This collection includes several interviews, which are part of *Downbeat* magazine's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary anthology of popular interviews, two of his Blindfold Tests for *Downbeat* magazine, a 1955 interview with Louis Armstrong for *Esquire*, and three Before and After Columns for *JazzTimes*.

In addition to writing books and magazine and newspaper articles, Feather was active throughout his career writing liner notes. Included in this collection are liner notes to sixteen albums out of the hundreds he wrote. Feather wrote most of the ones in this collection for Blue Note records in the 1950s and 1960s, which were reissued on CD in the last twenty years. The LPs in this collection date from 1959 to 1983, and represent numerous styles of jazz, from swing, to bebop, cool jazz, hard bop and fusion. One of the liner notes I find particularly interesting are those to trumpeter Miles Davis' 1983 album *Star People*. It is widely known that once Davis started using electronic instruments in the late 1960s that Feather began to dislike Davis' music. *Star People* makes heavy use of funk and rock styles – which Feather abhorred – yet Feather's liner notes sing the praises of the album, indicating that liner notes are not meant to be objective

criticism; rather, part of their purpose is to compliment and promote the album to potential customers.

Feather produced dozens of jazz recordings, two of which are included in this collection. One of Feather's main focuses as a record producer was producing albums by female musicians, which is exemplified by the album in this collection by Vi Redd, entitled *Bird Call*. Here Feather shows his numerous activities, as he produced the album, wrote some of its music, wrote the liner notes, and then wrote a review of for *Downbeat* magazine. The compilation included in this collection entitled *Jazz Women: A Feminist Retrospective* was not produced by Feather, but he produced many of the individual recordings on the two LP set. The *Leonard Feather Presents Encyclopedia of Jazz on Record* compilation, which contains the recordings Feather felt were the best from the 1920s and 1930s, shows Feather to be not only a record producer, but a historian and critic who was interested in canon building as well.

This collection serves many purposes for me. First, and most importantly, is academically. As I am writing about him in my dissertation, and plan to write a monograph on him in the future, the more materials of his I can have will only help those efforts. Second, because he wrote about the entire history of jazz up until his death in 1994, his work provides a wealth of reference and historical information to any jazz scholar. Third, being a jazz fan, I enjoy reading and listening to most of the material in this collection. I purchased and enjoyed of the materials in this collection, especially the CDs, long before I knew who Leonard Feather was. This speaks to the pervasive nature of Feather's work; one cannot be a jazz fan and not encounter Feather in one way or another.

This collection has been the result of numerous trips to used book stores, new and used record and music stores, antique malls and ebay searches. Given Feather's extraordinary output,

it is not hard to find materials related to him. Several of the items in this collection were found randomly at stores when I was not actively searching for Feather related items. Ebay provides an especially rich source of materials that can be hard to find at local stores, especially given that many Feather related material has been out of print for decades.

I plan to continue to expand this collection in several directions. First, this collection does not contain any of Feather's musical performances. He performed and recorded with numerous musicians throughout his career, and many of these performances are available on 78s, LPs and CDs. I especially would like to get a 78 recording of Helen Humes accompanied by Leonard Feather's Hip-tet. Many of his compositions were also recorded, and I would like to get a copy of the jazz suite he wrote about Santa Claus' reindeer. Second, part of my dissertation chapter on Feather focuses on his writing for *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Rogue* and other pornographic magazines. Before finishing that chapter I plan on purchasing some of the old issues from these magazines in which his writing appears. Third, I am slowly expanding my collection of old issues of jazz magazines – not only for Feather's writing, but because of the wealth of information these magazines, which can be hard to find in libraries, provide jazz scholars such as myself. Fourth, there are two of Feather's encyclopedias which I do not own, the *Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Sixties*, and a revised edition of the *Encyclopedia of Jazz* published in the 1980s. Fifth, I will undoubtedly continue to unintentionally collect Leonard Feather related materials, especially recordings that I did not know he produced, annotated, reviewed, performed on etc.

While this collection is varied, and represents some of the diverse output of Feather's career, it is by no means representative of every facet of his work. I plan to continue to expand it, both for my academic growth and personal enjoyment. This collection, or what I call my own

little “Feather’s Nest,” is the result of both my intellectual curiosity and interest in Leonard Feather, and my general interest in jazz, as a scholar, critic and jazz saxophonist.

**Annotated Bibliography:** “Feather’s Nest:” A Collection Exemplifying the Diverse and Prolific Career of Jazz Authority Leonard Feather

**Books**

Feather, Leonard. 1955. *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*. New York: Horizon Press.

This is the first installment in Feather’s *Encyclopedia of Jazz* series. It includes hundreds of pages of musician biographies, dozens of photographs, listings of jazz recording companies and organizations, and other reference materials. Feather also includes a brief history of jazz and a musical analysis. This volume contains Feather’s views on a number of issues and themes in jazz, allowing him to use his journalist, historian and critical voices.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1956. *The Encyclopedia Yearbook of Jazz*. New York: Horizon Press.

This is the second volume of Feather’s *Encyclopedia of Jazz* series and focuses explicitly on events in jazz from 1956. It contains an overview of jazz in 1956, some musician biographies, critics and readers poll results, Feather’s favorite albums of the years, photographs, lists of jazz night clubs and other reference materials.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1957. *The Book of Jazz: A Guide to the Entire Field*. New York: Horizon Press.

*The Book of Jazz* is one of the earliest survey books of jazz. It contains a brief history of jazz, a large section on jazz instruments used in jazz and the main performers of those instruments, an essay on jazz improvisation, and a series of brief interviews with prominent jazz musicians on what they felt jazz would be like in 1984. This book is important in that it shows Feather to be a chronicler and historian of jazz. In addition, by choosing the musicians to talk about he is taking part in the formation of the jazz canon.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1959. *The New Yearbook of Jazz*. London: Arthur Barker LTD.

This is the third volume of Feather’s *Encyclopedia of Jazz* series and focuses explicitly on the events in jazz in 1959. It contains over 200 new musician biographies, photographs, readers and critics poll results, an article on jazz and classical music by Bill Russo, Feather’s discussion of jazz overseas, and other reference materials. Like the other encyclopedias it shows Feather’s various writing voices and approaches to the construction of jazz historiography.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1960. *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*. New York: Bonanza Books.

This is an expanded and revised version of the 1955 encyclopedia. It includes more musician bios, a list of recommended jazz letters, articles by jazz musicians Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and Gunther Schuller. Feather also includes a chronology of jazz, numerous photos, a description of the musical fundamentals of jazz, as well as other informative articles. This volume not only gives detailed information on jazz up to 1960, but it also contains Feather’s views on a number of issues and themes in jazz, allowing him to use his journalist, historian and critical voices.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1976. *The Pleasures of Jazz: Leading Performers on their Lives, their Music, their Contemporaries*. New York: Horizon Press.



This book contains artist profiles and interviews of over forty jazz musicians from all generations and styles. It shows Feather's work as a journalist and provides the jazz scholar with a wealth of information on numerous important jazz musicians.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1980. *The Passion for Jazz*. New York: Horizon Press.

This book is a wide ranging collection of Feather's writing from the late 1970s. It includes artist profiles and interviews with over two dozen jazz musicians and others in the jazz industry, obituaries of artists who recently passed, brief essays on the role of television and radio in the late 1970s, reviews of domestic and international concerts, and Feather's reflections on jazz in the 1970s.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1987. *The Jazz Years: Earwitness to an Era*. New York: Da Capo Press.

This is Leonard Feather's autobiography, in which he discusses primarily his diverse and prolific professional career as well as his work on social issues, such as race and gender equality, as they pertained to jazz.

Feather, Leonard, Ira Gitler. 1976. *The Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Seventies*. New York: Horizon Press.

This is a revised version of Feather's previous encyclopedias. Like the others, it contains updated musician biographies, photos, etc. It focuses on the years 1966 (the year the *Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Sixties* was published) through 1975 and contains recommended recordings and books from that period. It also contains the results of readers and critics polls from several jazz magazines.

### **Album Liner Notes**

Leonard Feather wrote all the liner notes, which are meant to provide contextual information on an album, for the albums listed below. In general, Feather describes the musicians on each album and the music. The liner notes cannot be considered criticism or journalism, as he was paid to write them; thus, they should be seen as a combination of descriptive writing and praise of the albums and musicians. This selection is typical of Feather's work as a writer of liner notes and is another aspect of his work as a jazz authority.

Feather, Leonard. 1959. LP Liner Notes to Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges: *Back to Back: Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges Play the Blues* Verve Records MG V-8317.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1961. LP Liner Notes to Art Pepper Quintet: *Smack Up*. Original Jazz Classics OJC-176. LP Reissue of Contemporary Records S7602.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1966. LP Liner Notes to Shelly Manne: *Boss Sounds! Shelly Manne and his Men at Shelly's Manne-Hole*. Atlantic Records 1469.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1968. LP Liner Notes to Count Basie: *Basie Straight Ahead*. Dot Records DLP 25902

\_\_\_\_\_. 1973. CD Liner Notes to Dave Brubeck: *We're All Together Again for the First Time*. Atlantic Records 1641-2.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1983. LP Liner Notes to Miles Davis: *Star People*. Columbia Records FC 38657.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1987. CD Liner Notes to Kenny Dorham: *Afro-Cuban*. Blue Note Records CDP 7 46815 2. CD Reissue of 1955 Blue Note LP.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1997. CD Liner Notes to Donald Byrd: *At the Half Note Café, Volumes 1 & 2*. Blue Note Records CDP 7243 8 57187 2 4. CD Reissue of Blue Note BST 84060 and BST 84061.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. CD Liner Notes to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers: *Moanin'*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 7243 4 95325 2 7. CD Reissue of Blue Note BLP 4003 and BST 84003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. CD Liner Notes to Horace Silver: *Song for My Father*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 7243 4 99002 2 6. CD Reissue of Blue Note BLP 4185 and BST 84185.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. CD Liner Notes to Lee Morgan: *The Rumproller*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 7243 5 21229 2 9. CD Reissue of Blue Note BLP 4199 and BST 84199.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. CD Liner Notes to Lee Morgan: *The Sidewinder*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 7243 4 95332 2 6. CD Reissue of Blue Note BLP 4157 and BST 84157.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. CD Liner Notes to Jackie McLean: *Jackie's Bag*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 7243 5 42303 2 5. CD Reissue of Blue Note BLP 4051 and BST 84051.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. CD Liner Notes to Horace Silver: *The Cape Verdean Blues*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 7243 5 90839 2 6. CD reissue of BLP 4220 and BST 84220.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. CD Liner Notes to Donald Byrd: *Fuego*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 7243 5 63802 0 6. CD Reissue of 1960 Blue Note BST 84026.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. CD Liner Notes to Jimmy Smith: *Live at the Club Baby Grand, Vol. 2*. Blue Note Records RVG Edition 0946 3 92787 2 5. CD Reissue of 1956 Blue Note BLP 1529

### LPs

Redd, Vi. 1969. *Bird Call*. Solid State, SS 18038.

*Bird Call* is an LP by alto saxophonist and singer Vi Redd. The album was produced by Leonard Feather, contains performances of some of Feather's original compositions and liner notes by Feather. It is a sort of concept album, in that most of the songs are inspired by, or were performed by alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, who was known as "Bird." A section of chapter three of my dissertation focuses on Redd and this album specifically.

Various Artists. 1974. *Leonard Feather Presents Encyclopedia of Jazz on Records – Vol. 1 The Twenties/Leonard Feather Presents Encyclopedia of Jazz on Records – Vol. 2 The Thirties*. MCA Records MCA2-4061.

This compilation, which Feather produced, is a companion piece to Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz*. This collection contains what Feather considered to be canonical and essential jazz recordings from the 1920s and 1930s. There are a total of four additional volumes in this series, each focusing on a decade. I am interested in canon formation, and this is an example of not only Feather's work as a record producer, but as an example of canon formation.

Various Artists. 1977. *Jazz Women: A Feminist Retrospective*. Stash Records, ST 109.

This compilation contains several classic performances by female jazz musicians. Feather was not directly involved in the production of this compilation; however, he produced many of the recordings on the album. I am specifically interested in Feather's work to reduce gender bias in jazz, and his production of these recordings were a conscious attempt on his part to expose jazz listeners to female musicians in an effort to show that woman could play on the same level as a man.

### Interviews

*DownBeat – The Great Jazz Interviews: A 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Anthology*. 2009. Eds. Frank Alkyer, Ed Enright, Jason Koransky, Aaron Cohen, Jeff Cagle. New York: Hal Leonard.

The editors of *Downbeat* magazine compiled this collection of some of the magazine's more famous and popular interviews. It contains interviews by Leonard Feather with the following jazz musicians: clarinetist Artie Shaw, Stan Getz, Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Carney and Gerry Mulligan, and Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul. These interviews reflect a tiny output of the work Feather did that can be considered journalism.

Feather, Leonard. "Satchmo: The Three Lives of Louis Armstrong." *Esquire*. March, 1955, 80-82.

This 1955 interview with Louis Armstrong from *Esquire* discusses the musical, public and private lives of the famous trumpeter. It is notable in that Feather was a very good friend to Armstrong and demonstrates the intimate personal and public knowledge Feather shared with several

### **Blindfold Tests**

The Blindfold Tests were one of Leonard Feather's most significant contributions to jazz discourse. Beginning in the September, 1946 issue of *Metronome*, the Blindfold Tests were a regular column in which Feather played albums to jazz musicians without telling them what was playing. He then recorded, transcribed and published their responses. The tests moved to *Downbeat* in the early 1950s, where they continue to be published to this day. During his career Feather published over 1000 Blindfold Tests, two of which are listed below. I wrote my MA thesis on the Blindfold Tests, and I am interested in the variety of reactions from the musicians, many of which touch on pressing issues in jazz and American culture, such as race, gender, identity and geography.

Feather, Leonard. "Blindfold Test: Steve Khan." *Downbeat*. January 11, 1979, 33.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Blindfold Test: John Coltrane." *Downbeat*, July 12, 1979, 39.

### **Before and After**

The Before and After columns, published in *JazzTimes* magazine, are similar to the Blindfold Tests. *Downbeat* trademarked Blindfold Test, and when Feather left *Downbeat* for *JazzTimes* he had to modify the Blindfold Tests. Whereas the Blindfold Tests only recorded musicians' responses without knowing what they were listening to, the Before and After columns recorded their reactions both before and after they were told who they were listening to.

Feather, Leonard. "Before and After: Tommy Flanagan." *JazzTimes*, May 1992, 12-13.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Before and After: Barney Kessel." *JazzTimes*, July/August, 1992, 14.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Before and After: Delfeayo and Jason Marsalis." *JazzTimes*, November, 1992, 16-17, 80.