

## Total Chaos: The Art And Aesthetics Of Hip-Hop

Jeff Chang (Editor)

BASIC CIVITAS PBK \$18.95

Bay Area resident Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* (2005) is a landmark work in hip-hop historiography. Providing an exhaustive and passionate account of the birth and development of what has, after all, risen from the ashes of the late 70s South Bronx to become the world's most vital and influential musical genre, it rightly picked up the 2005 American Book Award and fast became regarded as a milestone in 21st century musicology and cultural anthropology. Now Chang steps onward with a second and similarly wide-ranging volume.

*Total Chaos* takes a different tack, Chang this time occupying the role of editor. Presenting a pluralistic and meticulously curated collection of essays, it both analyses and envisions the past, present and future of "one of the most far-reaching and transformative arts movements of the past two decades". While contributors include pioneering graffiti writers and breakdancers such as Jorge 'Popmaster Fabel' Pabon and Jeff 'DOZE' Green, its view extends further than turntables, microphones, spraycans and linoleum.

Instead it defines hip-hop, not as a simple musical genre, nor even as a straight subculture, but rather a nebulous and constantly evolving concept or attitude capable of absorbing and informing almost every aspect of 21st century creativity. It's no coincidence that both B-boy Zulu King Alien Ness and DOZE refer to the idea of hip-hop's roots lying in the "ether" (in its classical sense of an unknowable binding entity, the fifth and highest element after air, earth, fire and water, and the substance that composed all heavenly bodies). Divided into five sections, encompassing the issues of roots, interdisciplinary cross-pollination, identity, place and progression, no detail is left out, no opportunity left unimagined.

First up, 'media assassin' Harry Allen's "Dreams Of A Final Theory" tears down perceptions of the true and the real in relation to the intricacies of virtuoso turntablism, audaciously positing that a performance by Invisibl Skratch Piklz's DJ Q-Bert represents a "false remapping of hip-hop's original intent". It's a conflicting position, both recognising the strides the music has taken and the fact that this growth has distanced it from its fundamental purpose and meaning.

Next, spoken word artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph delivers "(Yet Another) Letter To A Young

Poet", a beautiful bit of writing that burns off the page, playing off the potential of hip-hop to enfranchise youth via the embrace of language and verse against that of established and accepted Eurocentric traditions. Placing rap's lyricism in a lineage from Alan Ginsberg's *Howl* to the Black Arts Movement, it's both confrontational and optimistic, calling for a social responsibility dedicated to the "upliftment of the collective" missing from much commercial rap, and truly believing this to be a tenable proposition. Reading the later poetry and prose of Bamuthi Joseph, Staceyann Chin, Suheir Hammad and Amde Hamilton of *The Watts Prophets*, the objective is hard to disagree with.

Most arresting of all, though, are the points at which often untouched topics are brought into the debate, such as Joël Barraquiel Tan's "Homothugdragsterism", an intriguing look at the effects of hip-hop on gay identity, and "A Brand New Feminism", a thought-provoking conversation between writer Joan Morgan and academic Mark Anthony Neal addressing the portrayal of women in music videos and the wider world, and the impact of Mike Tyson's 1992 rape conviction.

Travelling further afield, Chang's interview with film maker Eli Jacobs-Fauntauzzi examines

the political influence of hip-hop in Cuba, meanwhile Shaheen Ariefdien's and Nazli Abrahams's "Cape Flats Alchemy: Hip-Hop Arts In South Africa" offers yet another example of this culture's reach across borders. Alongside Raquel Cepeda's excellent "AfroBlue: Incanting Yoruba Gods In Hip-Hop's Isms", Part Four is where this anthology is most alive.

With further offerings by *Wire* writer Dave Tompkins, noted journalist Oliver Wang and Paul D Miller, aka DJ Spooky, among many others, *Total Chaos* is much more than a set of musings on rap music, taking in graphic design, photography and literature. However, actor and playwright Danny Hoch's "Toward A Hip-Hop Aesthetic" provides its defining moment, stating in its conclusion that: "Hip-hop is art. Whether it is revolutionary art or bling-ass-money-making-biaatch art, hip-hop art does not depend on how many records it sells, how much the gallery piece sold for... Although the culture is marginalised and misunderstood, it is also moving forward and maturing. There are rules, there is a foundation and motherfuckers better know the ledge. We must loudly define hip-hop's aesthetics. It is critical that we do." Mission accomplished in this case.

DAVE STELFOX

Unrepentant non-joiner: Lee Konitz



## Lee Konitz: Conversations On The Improviser's Art

Andy Hamilton

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Biography's name is mud to many scholars: they're suspicious of the genre's professed ability to synthesise the historical and the literary, and of its authors' easy massaging of inarticulate details into subjective coherence. Here Andy Hamilton, a stalwart at *The Wire* since the early days of the magazine, provides a new kind of jazz biography, one formed largely of conversations between author and subject. This dialogical model has already been imagined in postmodern anthropological texts, but Hamilton's work may well mark the inception of a format new to writing on Western music, one which avoids both the

self-aggrandising of autobiography and the stylised subjectification of biography.

Lee Konitz was born in 1927, to immigrant Austrian/Russian-Jewish parents in Chicago. There's something sad about the distance that Konitz recalls existing between him and his family, yet there's also something impressive in the way the young Konitz managed to slip free of some of the values, ethics and sacraments of Jewish-American working class life. Indeed, an itinerant career shows that the saxophonist was never a joiner, never tried to fit in. It's still true: John Zorn, one of Hamilton's many star-turn sub-interviewees, describes producing a Konitz CD project. Zorn wanted Radical Jewish Culture, but, he laments, Konitz just gave him more jazz. As part of the last generation to find the US's melting pot still bubbling,

Konitz seems to disdain crutches in self-identification just as he does in music making.

Nevertheless, the saxophonist admits identifying with musician/guru Lennie Tristano as "a white Italian American rather than an African American". And though Hamilton is gentle in his probing of matters racial-political – matters which radically reshaped Konitz's professional milieu over the course of his career – Konitz makes it clear that he never felt comfortable in "hip black music" circles. As if, given the 'whiteness' of his favoured playing contexts, that needed spelling out: having begun playing and studying with Tristano in 1943, the saxophonist joined Claude Thornhill, was an important presence in the Miles Davis-accredited *Birth Of The Cool* group, paused with Stan Kenton for long enough to contract tinnitus, and then formed his most important partnership of the 1950s with Warne Marsh, playing Marsh's Improv-contrapuntal, self-described "updated Dixieland".

Konitz was quiet in the 1960s and 70s, half in, half out of music, and Hamilton uses the opportunity to begin what one feels is the philosophy lecturer's real interest, an investigation into the practice and aesthetics of improvisation. If Konitz can be somewhat cursory in discussing his biography, he opens up here, microsensitively describing approaches to phrasing, intonation, rhythm, the instrument and song: he criticises jazz that, favouring harmony over melody, is "up and down more than across". This is a tremendously valuable practitioner's analysis, of a kind and on a par with those found in Paul Berliner's unimpeachable 1994 book *Thinking In Jazz*.

As an 'oral biography', the format tends not to make use of traditional, archival historical

methods. The narrative polyphony provided by Hamilton, Konitz and others provides its own richness, but memory and dialogue are not always enough to give really stable historical context. When the author gestures in that direction, problems arise. Trying to unpack the simplistic, politicised distinction made between the two jazz styles the 1950s Konitz straddled, 'black' bebop and 'white' cool jazz, Hamilton talks recordings and musical precedents that disprove the dichotomy. But the contemporary problems under discussion weren't really centred on the uses of music as such, but on the politics of representation that accompanied most *Down Beat* covers (on which black faces were taboo) – every instrument endorsement ad that featured an unproven great white hope over established black talent. This history requires archival sourcework that Hamilton's scheme doesn't allow.

The presence of Lennie Tristano is felt throughout (at one point Konitz groans as Hamilton returns once more to the subject of his prickly, controlling former teacher). Hamilton, like others elsewhere, contends that Tristano has been "historically neglected", and is deserving of more study (Hamilton's publishers are releasing a biography by Eunmi Shim this year). Yet although the reclusive Tristano only operated sporadically and locally, and his influence was felt by relatively few, his primary and secondary literature (and discography) is by no means scant; this is a subjective preference masquerading as an objective complaint against history's writing. If we're looking for a *really* historically significant yet under-evaluated jazz guru, let's have an oral biography of Jamey Aebersold, the Playalong King.

TOM PERCHARD