
Spring 2007

Jazz on the River by William Howland Kenney (Book Review)

Gene H. Anderson

University of Richmond, ganderso@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/music-faculty-publications>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Gene H. "Review of *Jazz on the River* by William Howland Kenney." *American Studies* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 154-55.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Music at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

JAZZ ON THE RIVER. By William Howland Kenney. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2005.

Jazz has not always been “America’s classical music.” In the first decades of the twentieth century it was regarded by much of the black and white Establishment as unsettling, provocative, even dangerous—attitudes exacerbated by the social upheaval of the Great Migration around the time of World War I. Enter black riverboat jazz bands to negotiate the color line: to help “white Americans approach in an oblique manner underlying social and cultural changes that were too deep and too heavily laden with pain, guilt, and fear for most citizens to discuss openly” (5). Such is the thesis of *Jazz on the River* by William Howland Kenney, who, like in his earlier studies of Chicago jazz and recorded music, supports his argument with speculative but compelling historical and cultural analyses.

On the riverboat, servings of jazz-accompanied dances were diluted with generous helpings of schottisches, polkas, waltzes. Blues and very slow (or very fast) dancing in general were prohibited, and the carefully-rehearsed, tuxedo-clad musicians read from stock arrangements that left little room for improvisation. Because of these restrictions, riverboat jazz was modified into “a partially tamed adaptation of New Orleans jazz” which “eliminated violence, affirmed the possibility of social order, and offered a promise of racial reconciliation” (81).

Music on the river began early in the nineteenth century with black roustabouts, who, after loading or unloading cargo, entertained packet boat passengers on board between stops. When railroads made packet boats obsolete by the end of the century, excursion boats emerged on the nation’s largest waterways in response to the public’s fascination with the “swan complex”—a romantic association of river travel with “water, air, whiteness, and graceful feminine movement” (32). Kenney sees riverboat orchestras as refined extensions of roustabout culture and as stimuli to the swan complex.

Chapter One traces the history of the Streckfus family, whose four generations dominated the excursion boat business on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers until the 1950s. Although dance bands played on Streckfus steamers as early as 1901, the hiring of Fate Marable, a light-skinned, hard-drinking pianist from Paducah, Kentucky, as band leader

in 1907 was to make history. From 1917 until 1940, Marable, the topic of Chapter Two, ran a waterborne jazz “conservatory” for black musicians that emphasized music literacy and professional discipline. Louis Armstrong, Marable’s most famous “graduate” and the subject of Chapter Three, became, for three summers (1919–1921), “the focus of a highly symbolic cultural struggle between oral and literate approaches to musical performance” (75). Subsequent chapters investigate the musical cultures of Memphis and St. Louis; the riverboat careers of Bix Beiderbecke and Jess Stacey; riverboat jazz on the Ohio; and the decline of jazz on the river. Appendices include exhaustive lists of excursion boat musicians and river songs and tunes.

The book is well written and well researched. Jazz may have been born in the Crescent City and attained its first maturity in the Windy City, but it “grew up” on the Mississippi. Kenney’s account of the music’s little-known adolescence helps to explain its appeal and acceptance by the general public.

University of Richmond

Gene Anderson