



Illuminating Texts

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Jazz for Children: The Picture Book Riffs of Chris Raschka

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Although jazz developed from the experience and traditions of African-American people at the beginning of the twentieth century, its rhythms and idioms continue to resonate today for a broader community of listeners throughout the world. Jazz continues to be strongly identified with African-American culture, but it has played with particular relevance to creative people in other media -- to artists and writers, no matter what their race. The influence of jazz can be seen in such iconic representations as F. Scott Fitzgerald's "jazz age" novels, the poetry of the Beats in the 1950s, Piet Mondrian's 1943 masterpiece "Broadway Boogie- Woogie," and the twenty paper collages created by Henri Matisse for his 1947 book called *Jazz*.

The years just after World War II were particularly significant for jazz. It was during this time that Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and a group of other talented musicians began to play in a new style they called "be bop," after the nonsense syllable commonly used in scat singing at the time. Unlike swing, the dominant form of jazz that immediately preceded it, be bop was not dance music. With its more complex rhythms and harmonic structures and its emphasis on improvised instrumental solos, it was meant to be listened to. One commentator compared be bop with the jazz that preceded it like this: "It's as if you had two roads, both going in the same direction but one of them was straight with no scenery around it, and the other twisted and turned and had a lot of beautiful trees on all sides" (Feather 16).

Charlie Parker was one of the musicians who took his collaborators and listeners down that second road. A legend in his own time, his virtuoso playing at lightning speed and his intricate harmonic compositions inspired and influenced a generation of jazz musicians. "A Night in Tunisia," composed by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, is one of the seminal pieces from the be bop period, beautifully expressing that twisting, turning road. It is sometimes called the anthem of be bop¹ and features one of Charlie Parker's most inspired virtuoso solos on the alto saxophone.

Chris Raschka, a young author/illustrator and a musician himself, was inspired by "A Night in Tunisia" to create a picture book tribute to Charlie Parker called *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop*. Reviewer Bill Ott called this a "truly bizarre premise," while acknowledging that "remarkably, it works" (1843). He goes on to say that Raschka doesn't try to teach young people about Charlie Parker's music; rather he tries to get them to hear it -- "not with sounds but with words and pictures." Indeed, through a syncopated text liberally sprinkled with nonsense words that mimic the sounds of jazz instruments -- "fisk, fisk," "zznzznn," "boppitty, bibbity, bop," "reeti-footi, reeti-footi, reeti-footi, ree" -- and visual images that play on Parker's nickname "Bird" and references to other Parker compositions, Raschka has made a picture book that you can hear .

Raschka's next picture book riff was *The Genie in the Jar*, written by African-American poet Nikki Giovanni, and inspired, Giovanni said, by the music of Nina Simone, a classically trained musician who began singing while playing piano in an Atlantic City bar and later composed her own powerful songs. While Charlie Parker received considerable acclaim during his lifetime, Nina Simone burst briefly onto the American music scene in the early 1960s and then faded into exile in Europe in the 1970s. She retains a cult following, however, particularly among African-American women and feminists of all races, who appreciate the unique quality of her voice -- velvety and raspy by turns -- and the forceful delivery of lyrics which are often angry and political.

The Genie in the Jar celebrates the strength of the bonds between African-American women, the "black loom" that ties them together and protects them from what is often a harsh world. Raschka has illustrated Giovanni's words by presenting a small African-American child encircled by the strong arms



of African-American women who warn her of the dangers around her -- "careful baby don't prick your finger" -- while giving her the freedom and security to sing her own song, woven from their own black loom and the blue of the sky. The child and the women are presented in many shades of brown, like the women in Nina Simone's own "Four Women." The pages of varying warm earth tones have textures that are as smooth and as rough as Simone's voice can be. It is another successful translation of sound, of music, to the pages of a book.

Mysterious Thelonious is Raschka's most complex effort to create a picture book that reads like jazz plays. This book is a tribute to jazz pianist Thelonious Monk and takes its inspiration from his composition "Misterioso." Here Raschka has matched the twelve musical tones of the chromatic scale to the twelve values of the color wheel and placed his short, syncopated text on the page like musical notes -- so that one could in fact, sit at the piano and play the words, reproducing the deceptively simple first bars of "Misterioso." The text -- "There were no wrong notes on his piano" -- may also be an ironic reference to the fact that Monk was not universally admired for his musicianship while he was alive. The result is an exuberant visual tour de force that dazzles the eye even as it entices the ear.

Given the importance of jazz in American cultural life, it is surprising that there haven't been more books that either introduce it to children or reflect its influence. Langston Hughes' *The First Book of Jazz* is now available only in a reprint edition for adults. Mary Weik's *The Jazz Man* -- also out of print in its original edition -- and *Ben's Trumpet* by Rachel Isadora both depict the fascination of jazz for young African-American boys whose lives are otherwise impoverished. Three recent books celebrate the life and music of Louis Armstrong: *If I Only Had a Horn: Young Louis Armstrong* by Roxanne Orgill; Alan Schroeder's *Satchmo's Blues*; and *What a Wonderful World* by Weiss and Thiele, with brilliant illustrations by Ashley Bryan. And that's it.

Do authors, illustrators, and editors think that children won't like books about jazz or find them relevant? That children won't understand? Chris Raschka has said that he wants to make books for children that are appealing but that also develop a child's visual intelligence. He writes, "How do you teach color, form, and line? You do it the same way you do words and sentences and ideas, by slowly increasing the level of complexity, depth, and multilayeredness" (Raschka, "32 Pages" 36). In his picture book riffs, those that deal with jazz as well as in his latest title, *Simple Gifts*, based on the well-loved Shaker hymn, Chris Raschka has given children works that will develop their musical intelligence while at the same time delivering the welcome gift of pure delight.

Notes

1. The jacket copy of Raschka's book, *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop*, is one of several sources to describe "A Night in Tunisia" as the anthem of be bop.

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