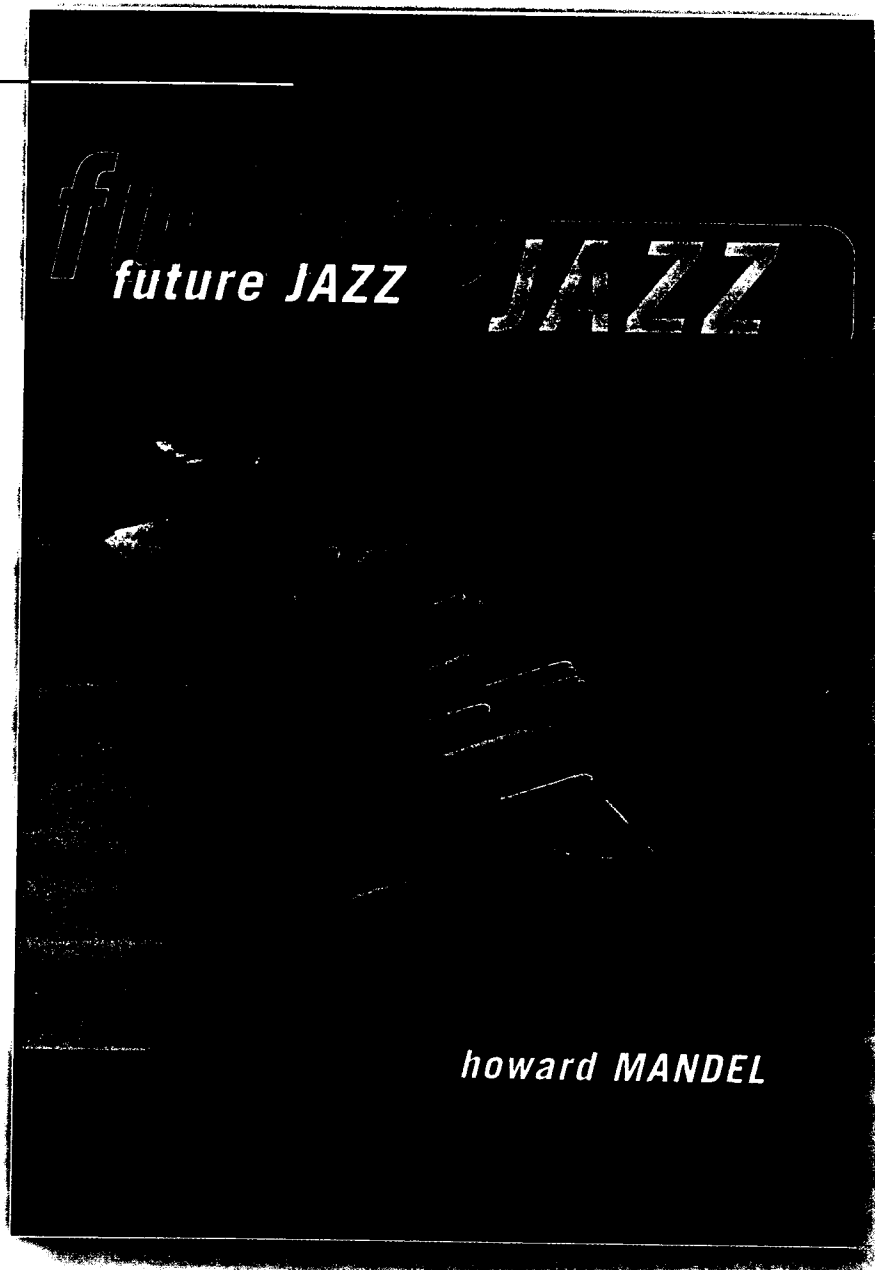


By Michael J. Kramer

JAZZ HISTORY HAS ALWAYS BEEN DISCORDANT, BUT THROUGH THE PAST 20 YEARS, THE QUESTIONS OF WHAT JAZZ IS AND WHERE THE MUSIC IS HEADED HAVE BEEN THE SUBJECTS OF HEATED, DOWNRIGHT VITRIOLIC, DEBATES. Nonetheless, even while nasty arguments about the music have raged, jazz has actually begun to get consolidated mainstream support. Everything from jazz's turn-of-the-century origins to hard bop of the late 1950s is being preserved and honored in unprecedented ways. Attend any show put on by Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York or simply tune in to Ken Burns' monumental public-television documentary in January to witness broad-based celebrations of jazz's rich, vitally American pedigree.

Yet jazz's trajectory since the mid-1960s has not attracted this same sort of organized appreciation. What can the music made after the mid-'60s — when John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Miles Davis, and others began extreme pursuits of freedom and fusion — tell us about jazz's identity and its destiny? *Future Jazz*, Howard Mandel's collection of essays, now out in paperback, seeks to address those questions.

For answers, he turns to a broad range of intriguing musicians: Wynton Marsalis (Mandel conducted *Down Beat's* first interview with Marsalis in 1984), John Zorn, Cassandra Wilson, Muhal Richard Abrams, Don Pullen, Steve Coleman, and Shelley Hirsch, among others. Mandel repeatedly circles back to the tricky issues of defining the jazz aesthetic and discussing how it might be refreshed without abandoning its roots. In the end, despite its title, *Future Jazz* is less a prediction of the jazz-to-come than an effort to celebrate a particular attitude and approach that Mandel hears in recent jazz. In other words, this book is



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intersections ahead

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Refashioning prior work for magazines (*Jazziz* included) and for National Public Radio into thematic essays, Mandel traces the cosmopolitan topography of a "future jazz." As a critic, he wants to guide us toward a new way of traversing jazz's busy avenues and its lost alleyways until we realize, finally, that they are all part of one vibrant neighborhood. In this imagined neighborhood, with Mandel's map in hand, apparent dead ends in the musical road suddenly connect back to central arteries, main drags branch off into alluring side streets, and the past lingers to enrich new developments even as these new developments honor their precedents.

Appropriately for a musical map-maker, Mandel begins and ends his book by exploring the geographic spaces in which jazz is played, heard, and lived. For the most part, that means the clubs of the Greenwich Village jazz circuit. In this locale, Mandel argues in his opening essay, "Maps, Myths, Arguments, Assumptions," that the pursuit of "future jazz" is the lifeblood of existence. "New York jazz and its evolutionary extensions became the myth music for worldly seekers of urbanity and surprise who might have diverse backgrounds but shared certain longed-for destinations," he writes. "The music provided intellectual and sensual stimulation, a way to rush toward the future and trade in on the past." But "future jazz" is about more than catching a great set at the Village Vanguard. "Jazz was born in the clubs, developed there, and needs the energy and special experiences of clubs to remain vital," Mandel quotes saxophonist Joshua Redman at the conclusion of the book. "But jazz needs even more than that."

For Mandel, the music's future rests on other factors in addition to the important spaces in which jazz can grow, honor its

past, and transform itself. These, Mandel suggests in his essays, include cross-generational communication between musicians, a continual examination of what jazz is by each individual musician and by the jazz community at large, and ongoing exploration of jazz's history, along with the new sounds and ideas to which it might connect in enlivening ways. Moving across the generations himself, Mandel records a conversation between the elder pianist Hank Jones and his younger colleague Geri Allen. Along with many fascinating details, the discussion demonstrates the humble and human side of a musical genre stuffed full of technical virtuosos and musical visionaries. The interview is downright cute, with Allen unable to stop referring to her senior as anything but Mr. Jones, despite his repeated requests that she simply call him Hank.

Mandel places this touching conversation in a chapter that includes surprising profile juxtapositions, moving from the spiritually minded flutist James Newton to the radical jazz-opera composer Anthony Davis to the jack-of-all-trades saxophonist Joe Lovano to the digital-age experimentalists Michael Brecker and Robin Eubanks. Mandel's *modus operandi* is to seek out surprising but important connections, both between distant stars of the jazz galaxy and between different musical galaxies altogether. A thoughtful essay on jazz guitarists makes such connections, this time between John McLaughlin, George Benson, John Scofield, and James "Blood" Ulmer. Furthermore, Mandel discusses these six-stringers not only in terms of the history of jazz guitar, but in the context of that other music so dominated by guitars: rock-and-roll. In general, the essays in *Future Jazz* reveal Mandel to be a bridge-builder, a boundary-challenger, a path-linker.

The only complaint to register is that

Mandel is often too subtle, too quiet, too much the invisible reporter and not enough the opinionated critic. He elicits evocative quote after quote from his interviewees, but we do not get enough of Mandel's own voice in these essays. "Future jazz" is an evocative concept that hovers over the book's pages like steam curling up from urban sewer caps, but it dissipates just as easily too. We never really learn from Mandel what constitutes this new way of making and hearing jazz. The definition seems filled with a graceful, mysterious magic, but it ultimately remains ineffable.

Only in the liner notes to a companion CD compilation — culled from the catalogs of Knitting Factory and Blue Note records, and including tracks from Eric Dolphy, Don Pullen, James Newton, Charles Gayle, Cassandra Wilson, the Jazz Passengers, and Andrew Hill — do we begin to get a sense of Mandel's important, perhaps essential, notion. To justify his selections, Mandel provides a moving description of the deep-down reasons why he himself has lingered in the jazz neighborhood so long that is also a simple key to his map: "Electric, acoustic, either-neither, in-between. These emanations beget (in my wildest dreams?) desire, salvation, humor and silly fun." Something in those sounds — the way they mix, mingle, and set off on their own ways again — keeps Mandel coming back. Now at last we can see him, long after midnight, wandering the jazz neighborhood that his book maps out, listening intently, seeking places he never knew existed even though he's walked by them daily. The renewal and enduring mystery of those places keep Mandel coming back, returning to old jazz haunts to launch himself on new jazz jaunts. "That's the point, ain't it?" Mandel asks, thinking about the "wildest dreams" future jazz inspires in him. "Otherwise: why?" ▲