

# The Voices Of Popular Music

**VISIONS OF JAZZ: The First Century**, by Gary Giddins. Oxford University Press, 690 pp., \$35.

**GROWN UP ALL WRONG: 75 Great Rock and Pop Artists From Vaudeville to Techno**, by Robert Christgau. Harvard University Press, 495 pp., \$29.95.

By Michael Kramer

**A**S THE CHIEF jazz and rock columnists respectively for *The Village Voice*, Gary Giddins and Robert Christgau have not only celebrated popular music for more than 25 years, they have pioneered the serious analysis of it. They've given shape to a kind of criticism that strives to be scholarly but approachable, poetic but conversational, celebratory but not fawning, daring but not self-indulgent, reasonable but, as befits the name of their newspaper, full of opinionated voice.

Their recently published essay collections — Giddins' epic "Visions of Jazz: The First Century" and Christgau's fervent "Growing Up All Wrong: 75 Great Rock and Pop Artists From Vaudeville to Techno" — are smart, literary, self-assured, heartfelt and politically conscious. Even when Giddins and Christgau falter in their ambitious efforts to write articulately about music, the sheer verve of their obsessional enthusiasm makes them worth reading. These two men are astute listeners, encyclopedic factoid buffs, individualistic thinkers and phrase-turners of the first order. And while their books demand a certain level of knowledge about jazz and rock, they offer insights aplenty for any aspir-

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ing aficionado interested in pondering popular music as much as grooving to it.

The similarities between Giddins and Christgau are many, perhaps because Christgau has edited Giddins for almost all of the latter's career at the *Voice*. Both aim to write with nuance and wit. Both are sharply attuned to topics such as race and class. They possess enlightening contrasts as well. Giddins, focusing on jazz, plays the musicologist, the historian, the exacting precisionist. Christgau, concentrating on pop and

rock, plays the sociologist, the metaphysicist, the risk-taking theorist, the expansive dreamer. Giddins assiduously chronicles jazz' complex song structures and improvisational innovations such as Charlie Parker's harmonic breakthroughs (musical tablature included). Responding to the more elemental sounds of rock, Christgau makes conjectures about the rambunctious energy and raw emotions behind pop songs, albums, artists and fads such as the Artist, Sonic Youth, KRS-One and James Brown.

Giddins works by comparison, not just famous ones such as Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young, but surprising, genre-bending comparisons — Cecil Taylor and Beethoven, or Jelly Roll Morton and Orson Welles. Christgau works by locating the contradictions that power pop music's engine, the tensions between chaos and order, sinning and salvation, love and lust, repression and release, male and female sexuality, the

blues and country music, fans and the stars they worship. Overall, Giddins' book reads like a lecture from a hip professor; he's the guy you'd love to sit around with listening to records, because he can dissect a song with a meticulousness few critics can rival. Meanwhile, Christgau's book reads like the musings of a professional hipster; he's the guy you want to go to concerts with, because he makes pop music feel like a ritual experience.

"Visions of Jazz" is the more ambitious effort in scope. Giddins has even compiled a two-CD set (Blue Note Records) to accompany his book. The traditional song "Didn't He Ramble" turns up throughout Giddins' essays, and one fears it might wind up being a sort of leitmotif for this 690-page compendium. Fortunately, Giddins is almost never

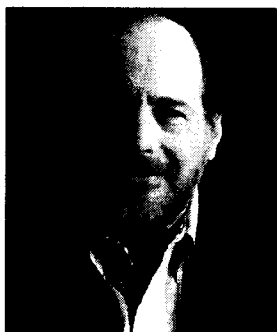


Photo by Luke Lols

Gary Giddins

boring. For a music based on the interaction between soloist and band, Giddins' approach — 79 separate essays on individual musicians — seems remarkably appropriate. It's as if each performer, from luminaries like Louis Armstrong to unsung masters like Budd Johnson, takes a solo against Giddins' richly textured arrangement of jazz history. And Giddins, as the orchestrator and conductor of this history, is confident and compelling; "Visions of Jazz" reveals him as the Duke Ellington of jazz critics.

And Giddins is a great teller of jazz anecdotes. He relays wonderful tales such as one about Dinah Washington — "the Queen of the Blues" — touring England and declaring, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm happy to be here, but just remember, there's one heaven, one earth and one queen, and your Elizabeth is an imposter."

Giddins' essays on the larger figures of jazz are his best. In his three pieces on

Ellington, for example, he transcends the discographic album summaries to which he sometimes resorts and executes keen, beautiful writing. He hinges his ideas on well-researched quotes, such as Ellington's claim that "you can't write music right unless you know how the man who'll play it plays poker." Surprisingly, Giddins seems less focused in essays on contemporary figures such as Geri Allen and Joshua Redman. But even at his most off-the-cuff and casual, Giddins' passion for jazz is contagious.

Christgau's book is shorter, but he reaches for bolder, more provocative ideas. Known as the "dean of rock critics" for being one of the first, he is a true believer in rock and roll, and much as he can be terrifyingly silly (as when he brings details of his sex life into his criticism), he is also wonderfully serious about the subtleties of this rather rude and crass genre of popular music. "Are even Southern boogie bands less simple than they seem?" he asks in a funny, tortured essay on his love for the group Lynyrd Skynyrd, often dismissed as racist rednecks. At times curmudgeonly, at times tender-hearted, sometimes a bit too self-involved but always refreshingly blunt and honest, Christgau makes rock into something of life-or-death importance.

Writing about everyone from Madonna to Marshall Crenshaw to Malathini and the Mahotella Queens, Christgau explores some persistent themes: the ramifications of the '60s, racial and class factors in music, the implications of democracy in communal and individual rock efforts, and what he calls the "nexus" of album, persona, history and fantasy that defines rock-star images and momentous rock music occasions. He's at his best on guitar-dominated performers like the Rolling Stones, Chuck Berry, the New York Dolls and Pavement. He also writes evocatively about the nuances of emotion he hears from myriad vocalists, from Janis Joplin to John Lennon to Al Green to George Jones to Bonnie Raitt.

Christgau is less convincing when ex-

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ploring the intricacies of rap and hip-hop, but he clearly loves the music; unlike many rock critics, he views it as a crucial part of the rock canon. He also has a touching essay on taking his daughter to see what he fears will be an X-rated Janet Jackson concert. And Christgau instigates a brave investigation of the differences between love and lust in an interview with Polly Jean Harvey.

Writing a Kerouacian ode to Kurt Cobain after the singer's suicide, Christgau comments, "He's a goof — an intelligent goof, with the love to back up his political im-

pulses, but a goof nevertheless . . . we need the goofs — we need them bad." Christgau is an intelligent goof too; lucky we still have him around.

Like most successful rock critics, Giddins and Christgau make you want to hear the music they critique. But they do more. They clarify the often murky milieu in which popular music takes place: the forces of the marketplace; the personalities behind the chords and beats; the cultural themes that, if only on some submerged level, make a song feel profoundly meaningful. Like Count Basie's piano tinkles, James Brown's grunts or Neil Young's squalls of guitar feedback, their best writing pushes music to another level. It's as if, using language, they play along with the music they analyze. When they get their critical riffs right, you can bop your head and think with it too.