TURNING PAGES

JAZZIZ REVIEW OF BOOKS

Of Jazz And Self

Two new scholarly works look for literary images of identity in the music

By Michael Kramer

▲ *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*
By Ralph Ellison
Edited by Robert G. O'Meally
(The Modern Library/Random House)
▲ *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*
By Farah Jasmine Griffin
(The Free Press/Simon & Schuster)

"Who knows very much of what jazz is really about?" Ralph Ellison asked in an essay on the legacy of Charlie Parker. "How shall we ever know until we are willing to confront anything and everything which it sweeps across our path?" In their respective books, editor Robert O'Meally and author Farah Jasmine Griffin cast the jazz net wide in an effort to catch the larger cultural meanings that jazz suggests and encompasses. Their work adds detail to the emerging field of jazz cultural studies, in which the music is but the starting point for studying a sensibility or an entire system of thought.

But while their findings share a broad belief that jazz is much more than just a musical form, O'Meally's presentation of Ellison's writings and Griffin's examination of Holiday take different forms and produce different results. By gathering together criticism, excerpts from novels, letters to friends, and interviews, O'Meally reconsiders Ellison's rich, multivalent vision of jazz. *Living With Music* corrects dismissals of Ellison as a narrow, conservative thinker about the music and its significance. While O'Meally focuses on Ellison and jazz directly, Griffin considers the iconic status of Billie Holiday in a more diffuse manner. She critiques Holiday's legacy by exploring how it has affected other singers, turned up in movies, inspired poets, been manipulated by advertisers, and influenced her own upbringing.

Ellison lived and breathed jazz, and sought to articulate in both criticism and fiction its invigorating fusion of sorrow and triumph, aesthetics and politics, individual freedom and community cohesion. Born in Oklahoma City in 1914, he was a musician before he became a writer. "I am not particularly religious, but I am claimed by music," he noted in a speech to commemorate his music professor at Tuskegee Institute, William L. Dawson. Ellison's understanding of jazz emerges in *Living With Music* as something empathetic, complex, multifaceted, and radically humanistic. One might label it, rather than an ideology, a sensibility that enlivens and illuminates jazz's place in African-American culture and American culture in general.

Ellison viewed jazz not only as a sophisticated extension of the blues — itself already sophisticated in his interpretation — but as a kind of institutionalized expression of democratic hopes and fears, possibilities and problems, most especially for African-Americans. In O'Meally's lucid introduction, he recalls an interview in which Ellison declared that, contrary to the critiques of 1960s black nationalists, African-Americans did have strong institutions: the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and jazz. As O'Meally explains, Ellison believed that those institutions provided "values and strategies of living that have served as unseen but vital sources of strength for Americans who, whether at the nation's Savoy Ballroom, at house parties, or at breakfast barbecues, celebrate themselves as unself-conscious heirs to a democracy, which, scarred and battered as it is, remains our 'home in the world, which is love.'"

As O'Meally displays in *Living With Music*, jazz provided Ellison with a means to address and experience democracy in all its complexity. Ellison wrote, "Jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group — each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity, and as a link in the chain of tradition." To Ellison, jazz involved not only the musicians, but also the audience. It was an institution of sound and movement that fused the two together into a community based on individual freedoms. In an elegy for Jimmy Rushing, Ellison declared, "It was when Jimmy's voice began to soar with the spirit of the blues that the dancers and the musicians achieved that feeling of communion which was the true meaning of the public jazz dance."

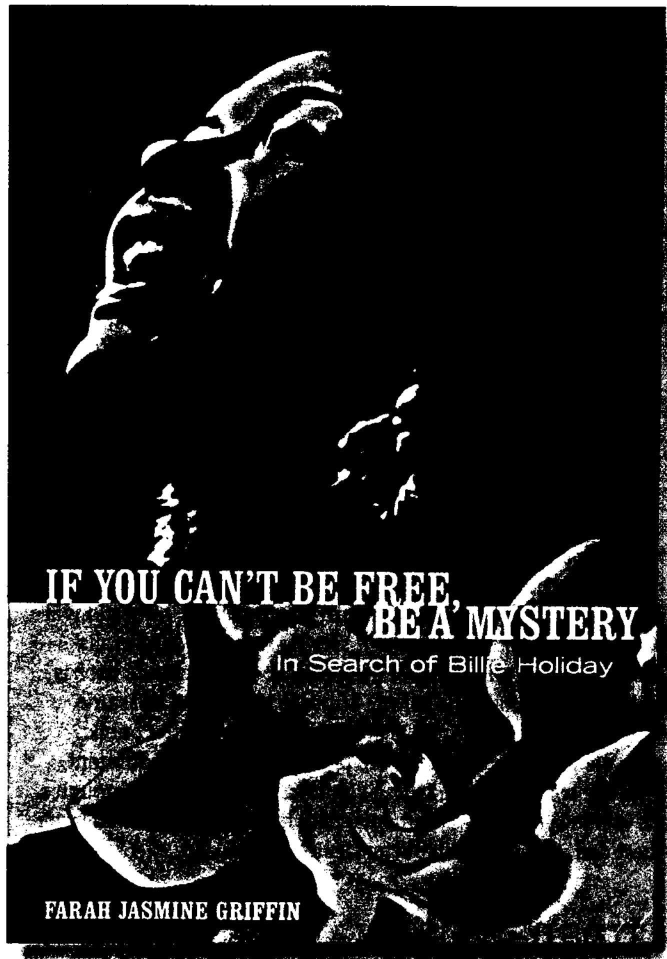
Even in bebop, which he critiqued strongly (but not without an appreciation for its artistic breakthroughs), Ellison located heroic meaning in Charlie Parker's technical virtuosity and Dizzy Gillespie's clever tricksterism. Most of all, Ellison emphasized that jazz was much more than just a pleasurable diversion (though it was that too). "The abiding moods expressed in our most vital popular art form are not simply a matter of entertainment; they also tell us who and where we are," he wrote.

To Ellison, jazz could rise to new heights of artistic, even political, eloquence because of its connections to the blues. Perhaps no one has defined the blues as well as Ellison. He wrote that the blues "constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go." In writing about the novelist Richard Wright, Ellison described the blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."

One of Ellison's great insights into jazz and the blues, which O'Meally invoked in his own 1990 book on Billie Holiday, was to comprehend how it revealed the power of personas in American democratic life. What Ellison sought to articulate was how jazz and the blues harnessed the power of self-invention — and thus the possession of self-agency — for African-Americans functioning under arduous circumstances in America. In this interpretation, freedom stemmed from the ability to invent a number of roles for the self in order to exist in a community of friends and foes. Jazz gave form, shape, and sense to this sort of freedom; it featured improvisers quoting songs, imitating each other, syncopating the rhythm, developing their own voices, playing against and with each other in big bands, participating in small cutting sessions, soaring into flights of innovation, then returning to the group. Donning masks that somehow revealed their own souls, jazz musicians enacted democratic ideals, hopes, possibilities, and failures, according to Ellison.

FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN, BY COMPARISON, WANTS TO REMOVE THE JAZZ MASKS THAT ELLISON PRAISES. In their place she seeks to illuminate a more stable, usable role model for African-American femininity. As Griffin tracks the "dominant myths" about Lady Day by following Holiday-the-icon into many nooks and corners of recent cultural production, the author attempts to "demonstrate the danger these myths pose for those of us who might get written into them or, worse yet, who might write ourselves into the corners they create."

Where Ellison sees the myths created by artistic masking as triumphs of invention, Griffin sees them as denials of the true self. Perhaps her different take on jazz identity and myth stems from gender: she articulates a feminist critique of Ellison's masculinized, heroic ideal of the



musician as self-reliant citizen. Or perhaps it's because she lives in an era with different ideals than those found in Ellison's mid-20th-century world. While O'Meally explored *The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* in his book on Holiday, Griffin goes *In Search of Billie Holiday*. That is, O'Meally recognized the painful dimensions of Holiday's life, but was most intrigued by the singer's ability to survive and flourish artistically through deft self-invention. Griffin's book focuses more literally on the ramifications of Holiday's legacy.

A search like this could certainly be an entertaining and meaningful quest, and indeed it is at times. Griffin thoughtfully considers the texts, sounds, and photographs of and about Holiday. But her book seems to resist its own subtitle. Griffin states in the preface that her most important goal is to show that "to be talented, black, sensual, and complex does not have to lead to addiction, a life of unhealthy relationships and an early, tragic death." In other words, she wants to demythologize Holiday's iconic stature in order to combat what she views as its destructive allure.

Though Griffin decides that the singer Abbey Lincoln provides a better, more healthy example for modern African-American women, she cannot escape her own fascination with Holiday or her own sense that Holiday remains a powerful presence in the cultural life of America, for black women and many others. While Ellison — as O'Meally's collection ably demonstrates — might have viewed Holiday's enduring significance as proof of the power of the singer's heroic acts of artistic self-creation in the face of extreme duress, Griffin views it as evidence of a lingering lack of self-esteem among contemporary black women. In the background, as Ellison and Griffin listen intently, you can hear Lady Day, like all great jazz artists, insisting that we take all of her.

Dispatches From The Front

A new book draws free-jazz battle lines; Marsalis' septet rolls on.

By Larry Blumenfeld