

Cadenza

By Gary Giddins

Post-Jazz TV

When Ken Burns' *Jazz* aired in 2001, I figured that its popular acclaim coupled with the complaints of those who faulted it for ignoring the past 40 years (particularly the avant-garde) would unleash a slew of documentaries to set things right. I did hear from a couple of filmmakers at the time who were embarking on projects about the 1970s "loft" era, and maybe they are on point. I hope so. They don't have an easy time of it—first raising money to do the work and then finding a station to air it. I thought Burns' epic might even generate the restoration of a weekly PBS jazz spot. I know I know: How naive can you get?

Yet a half-hour show in the mold of Ralph J. Gleason's 1960s *Jazz Casual* could be produced for spare change and guarantee a sizeable audience in key markets. It would better justify listener handouts than those humiliating nostalgia fests and satisfy public television's make-believe mandate to do more than import oil company ads and dubious masterpieces. Gleason's series was simplicity itself: Each show began with a name band playing a tune on a studio stage with no live audience. Midway, the host and bandleader pulled a couple of chairs to chat for a few minutes, then the music resumed without interruption through the credit roll. (See for yourself on the DVDs.)

At a time when commercial radio and television, including 200-plus cable stations that constitute the biggest diversity fraud since the dismantling of antitrust, are closed to jazz, a public broadcast system has an obligation to regularly program music that it vaunted, via Burns, as a national treasure.

Once upon a time, TV brought millions of people deeper into music, in many instances providing them with the only exposure they would get to classical music and jazz. Leonard Bernstein was an educational industry: his *Omnibus* hour "what is Jazz?"—on the CD *Bernstein on Jazz*—remains a mildly patronizing but effective and occasionally hilarious (the operatic blues) tour de force.

Broadcast specials once celebrated Casals, Horowitz and Ellington; after Robert Kennedy was killed, one network responded by broadcasting several hours of uninterrupted live jazz.

One musician I first encountered on TV was Cecil Taylor, presented on PBS's predecessor, NET, by a visibly ambivalent Martin Williams and a downright suspicious Ralph Ellison. Until I saw it a year ago for the first time in nearly four decades, I hadn't even recalled their participation—but I had correctly recalled Taylor's, which sent me out the next day to buy his Montmartre recording, now available from Revenant as *Nefer-titi! The Beautiful One Has Come*.

I don't expect to see a sequel anytime soon, but filmmaker Christopher Felver has leaped into the breach and made a remarkable 72-minute documentary about Taylor, *All the Notes*, that PBS ought to grab. In 1981, Ron Mann captured Taylor in performance—as well as Archie Shepp, Paul Bley and Bill

Dixon—for his film *Imagine the Sound*. But Felver, who previously made films about Lawrence Ferlinghetti, John Cage, and Sonic Youth, is the first to penetrate some of the mist surrounding his personal life, capturing Taylor at home, at a club digging Billy Bang, with students, in rehearsals, in concert.

Felver judiciously uses talking heads—Elvin Jones, Amiri Baraka, Al Young, Nathaniel Macke—but except for those few cut a ways, Taylor is always on camera, and the result in the most incisive portrait in the nearly half century since *Jazz Advance*. Taylor recalls his mixed heritage (Kiowa and Cherokee among others); his father's musical favorites (Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Bing Crosby, and Judy Garland); his early work in nightclubs ("If I never hear 'Stardust' again in my life it will be too soon"); his admiration for Charlie Parker ("the seminal musician"), Dizzy Gillespie and Mal Waldron; and his growing obsession with practice ("Now when I practice, and Mommy, hear me, I know how to do it"). He works to make his students laugh, explains his approach to scores (his masterly holographs resemble a cross between very complicated physics problems and drawings by Miro), improvisation and life. "What we do we do in spite of the forces that don't want us to do it," he says, yet insists. "Everything should be fun." In one passage, Felver shows four images simultaneously, the sound of one square edging out the others in rotation.

All the Notes arrives at a time when Taylor, at 75, is at the peak of his powers. When I saw him conduct a workshop for NYU music students, in October, he radiated strength; after an especially gripping solo performance he observed that the pleasure of playing increases over time. A born aphorist, he asked the students at one point if logic wasn't "the lowest form of magic." Taylor has devoted his life to the higher, spiritual reach of magic, and the sense of privilege we experience in hearing him is reserved for magicians who do what no one before them thought to do and what no one after them will do as well.

I tend to listen to Taylor recordings in shifts. These are the ones I'm most pleasurable immersed in at the moment: *One Too Many Salty Swift* and *Not Goodbye* (Hatology), a new reissue of a landmark 1978 sextet concert; *Nailed* (FMP), a bracing 1990 quartet with Evan Parker; *The Owner of the River Bank* (Enja), recorded in 2000 with the Italian Instabile Orchestra and one of the most disarmingly serene big-band recordings he has made; and— if I had to choose just one for this month's desert isle—*The Tree of Life* (FMP), a dynamic, faultless, overwhelming 1991 solo recital.

PBS has an obligation to program music that it vaunted as a national treasure. Christopher Felver's Cecil Taylor film would be a start.