



Outcats: Jazz Composers, Instrumentalists, and Singers

Francis Davis

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With his essays on jazz for a variety of publications, including *The Atlantic*, *7 Days*, and *The Village Voice*, Francis Davis has established himself as a major voice in jazz criticism. *In the Moment*, his first collection, published in 1986, won praise from both the jazz and general press. *down beat* called it "a collection as useful to future generations for how it captures this moment in musical evolution as for how it alters our vision now." *The New York Times Book Review* compared it to "a well-blown solo."

In *Outcats*, Davis presents a new series of critical essays, artist profiles, and pieces that skillfully combine both modes. In the 1950s, Paul Knopf, a now forgotten and even then obscure pianist, coined the word "outcat" to describe himself as "an outcast and a far-out cat combined." In using a word originally meant to convey jubilant defiance, Davis recognizes its undertones of alienation and cultural exile. Some of his subjects are outcats because of their politics, drug problems, or musical iconoclasm. But Davis defines *all* jazz performers--"including the most famous, influential, and housebroken"--as outcats, by virtue of the scant recognition given them by contemporary society.

Like *In the Moment*, *Outcats* is an indispensable guide to the best in recent and reissued jazz. Davis illuminates the unusual aspects of famous performers--Duke Ellington composing an opera, for example, or Miles Davis talking about his move into pop--while deftly analyzing their music. His subjects range from the mainstream to the experimental, from the familiar to the forgotten; from Frank Sinatra, Billie Holiday, and Wynton Marsalis to Cecil Taylor, John Zorn, and Sun Ra. Whether challenging the portrayal of Charlie Parker in *Bird* or admitting to his own fondness for the rock singer Bobby Darin, Davis writes with wit, sensitivity, and candor. As Pauline Kael describes him, "He gets at what he responds to and why--you feel you're reading an honest man."

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