

# These Books Are Not Quiet

## Bebop, Blues, Swing, and Soul: Jazz in Children's Books

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*Ladies and gentlemen . . .*

Colors and words breeze across pages, drifting or gusting in rhythmic phrases.

*As you know we have something special down here . . .*

And can you hear? If jazz could be seen, this is where it is found.

*Different passages . . .*

Duke, Charlie, Coltrane, and Ella—they're all here.

*Let's get together, and see these books . . .\**

\*(With apologies to  
Pee Wee Marquette)

Pages seem to pulse as they fill the senses with rhythm, setting, and pattern. Reflecting attitude and time, young readers and listeners are inducted into the world of . . . jazz. Music and musicians are represented in visual and textual styles that mix and balance, amplify, and absorb, like the sounds that jazz makes.

Jazz is a genre of music like no other. It is a combination of cultures, elements, and vibrations that embrace the soul. It is a range of sounds and emotions in styles that can be characterized as ebullient, cool, enthusiastic, doleful, or any of a thousand other sensations, pulsations, and lo-o-o-ng bluesy notes. Similar to the legendary Pee Wee Marquette—who often introduced jazz artists at Birdland with his distinctively piercing soprano-like voice, proclaiming another night of jazz at the club<sup>1</sup>—we herald jazz as a unique art form for the reader's pleasure, and spotlight books that emanate and radiate jazz.

Like jazz artists improvising to differentiate and discern, books about jazz for young readers stand out and away from other genres. Perhaps because of the broad yet exceptional and exclusive canvas of sounds and emotions in jazz, certain illustrators and authors for young people have capitalized on the unique relationship between text and image.

Picture books often weld images and sounds (words), yet jazz often creates dissonance. While words and art each contribute a portion to the ideas readers use to interpret or make sense of picture books, the words and art may not always reflect reciprocity. Carol Driggs Wolfenbarger and Lawrence Sipe suggest there is a "dissonance" between text and illustration: "In



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a picture book, words and pictures never tell exactly the same story. It is this dissonance that catches the reader's attention. Readers work to resolve the conflict between what they see and what they read or hear."<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Sipe suggests a metaphor for text and illustration in picture books, referring to use of the terms “rhythmic syncopation,” “harmony,” “duet,” “disharmony,” and “dissonance,” and these may be the relationships employed by author and artist.<sup>3</sup> In other words, like music, the instruments of picture books—words and art—may work in tandem for the reader, or these two instruments may be playing different melodies, so to speak, creating opposing ideas for the reader to consider when creating meaning.

We posit that picture books about jazz amalgamate numerous devices, described by Wolfenbarger and Sipe, in ways that convey the soul of jazz through the depictions of sounds of jazz. Readers are provided words and images in ways that transcend print and trip the emotions of sound and sense to create the essence of jazz. The elements of picture-book art, such as line, shape, and color, mingle and fuse to assist the reader to go beyond seeing and reading, but to go to another dimension. The melding of these artistic elements triggers the mind's eye to experience a mental picture of jazz. In other words, picture-book artists create images of what they imagine jazz “looks like” and offer this to readers of all ages.

Of course, artistic techniques vary from book to book. While some portray diverse styles of art, others play upon shadows, various skin tones, and exaggerated stances, to stimulate the reader's interest. Terms that capture the exuberance of jazz can be found in Walter Dean Myers' definition of jazz, “A style of playing dependent on syncopated rhythms, improvisation, and freedom of expression.”<sup>4</sup> This serves to chaperon our eyes and ears, our sensibilities to this genre. The literary and visual elements of jazz picture books depict extraordinary movement, boldness, and fluidity that mirror lines like the music itself. Therefore, many children's books about jazz exemplify elements of jazz, including the following:

- **Improvisation:** “A practice of creating music, either by harmonic, melodic, or rhythmic means at the moment it is being performed. Improvisation is a signature attribute of jazz and is at the heart of many of its compositions.”<sup>5</sup>
- **Rhythm:** “The movement of musical tones with respect to time, that is, how fast they move (tempo) and the patterns of long and short notes as well as of accents.”<sup>6</sup>

- **Syncopation:** “An important stylistic element in jazz music, syncopation occurs when rhythmic accents are placed on weak beats or weak parts of the beat.”<sup>7</sup>

We found these three elements illuminated in standout books about jazz representing various genres—history, biography, picture books, and poetry. Literary elements including onomatopoeia, staccato, and riff-like phrases intermingle with illustration to depict what jazz is, establishing a kinship in all aspects of visual and textual format.



“Charlie Parker on alto sax— / don't need a word. . . . / Notes fly through the sky / on the wings of a bird.” Leo and Diane Dillon, *Jazz on a Saturday Night* (New York: Blue Sky, 2007), n.p. Photo used with permission of Blue Sky/Scholastic.

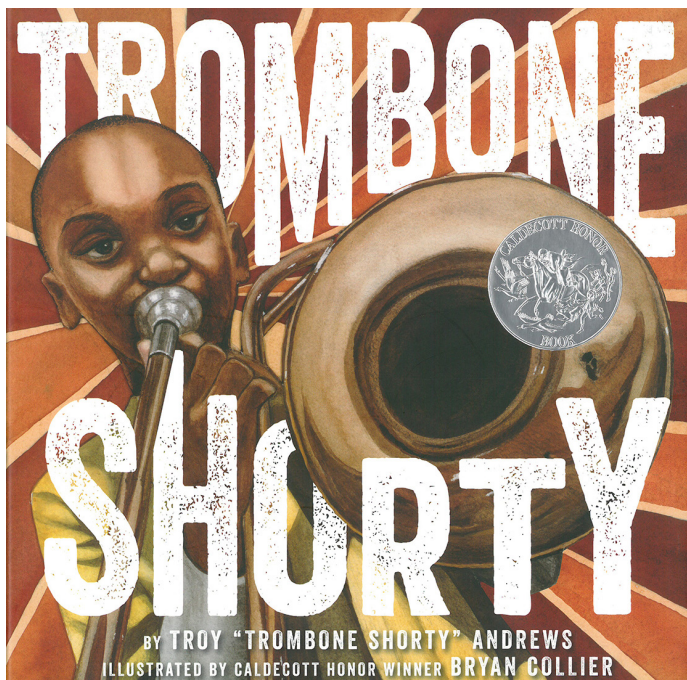
While not a picture book, Nat Hentoff's 1965 young adult novel *Jazz Country* may be considered the first book of jazz for non-adult readers. Hot colors and wavy lines radiate from a jazz horn on the front cover. Since then, authors and illustrators have emulated the improvisation of jazz by producing a steadily increasing crescendo of jazz books for young people. The *look* of jazz seems to stand apart from art seen in many other books.

From among the many jazz books available for children, we selected the following books because they bring music to life in their intense and prominent visual styles. These books are recommended because of their playful language, rhythmic flow, and unique combination of language and art that work so beautifully together to help us “see” the sound of jazz.

## Books Conveying Historical Perspectives

Jelly Roll Morton claims to have invented jazz, and Jonah Winter explains, “Here's what could've happened/if you were born a way down south/in New Orleans, in the Land of Dreams/a long, long time ago,”<sup>8</sup> in *How Jelly Roll Morton Invented Jazz* (2015), illustrated by Keith Mallett. Streams of musical notes fly from the time Jelly Roll Morton was a baby. They circle, they gust, and strands of jazz surround the streets. The music flourishes against skies of light blue and cobalt, silhouettes and shadowy images of people, and backgrounds washed in golds and oranges. There are no hard lines in the illustrations, as if the vibrations of jazz affect even the buildings. An author note, “How Jell Roll Morton (Might Have) Invented Jazz,” appears in the final spread, with the information also surrounded by a curving stream of notes.

In *Jazz on a Saturday Night* (2007), Leo and Diane Dillon explain the history of jazz as an art form, stating jazz “reached its height of popularity in the 1940s and 1950s, but it is still very much alive and respected around the world.”<sup>9</sup>



### Images of Jazz Receive Recent Recognition!

Troy Andrews explains how he merged a vibrant concoction of jazz sounds from his native New Orleans to become the musical phenomenon “Trombone Shorty.” The book by the same name, *Trombone Shorty* (Abrams 2015), co-authored by Andrews and Bill Taylor, and with illustrations by Bryan Collier including wafts, spirals, and blasts of sound received the Coretta Scott King (Illustrator) Book Award, and was distinguished as a 2016 Randolph Caldecott Honor Book.

In *The Sound That Jazz Makes* (2000), Carole Boston Weatherford introduces us to the genesis of jazz, and creates a lens for viewing the history of African Americans who invented this distinct and uniquely American style of music. Using repetition, or a repeated sequence, just as musicians use repetition and variance to effect balance, Weatherford begins each textual four-line stanza, or verse, with “This is . . .” For example, “This is Africa where rhythm abounds/and music springs from nature sounds/played on a drum carved from a tree/that grows in a forest of ebony.”<sup>10</sup> From Africa, she takes us to the slave ships, to auction blocks and fields, escape routes, to the Delta and to churches, steamboats, the legendary venue Birdland, to the street where hip hop beats, and then adds the variance, “JAZZ is the downbeat born in our nation/chords of struggle and jubilation/bursting forth from hearts set free/in notes that echo history.”<sup>11</sup> And finally, “This is/the sound/that jazz/makes!”<sup>12</sup> Illustrator Eric Velasquez creates a harmony with images that illuminate and elaborate with instruments, singing, and bodies and faces held high, all in the portrayal of *The Sound That Jazz Makes*.

The words of H. L. Panahi, and paintings of Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher in *Bebop Express* (2005) take us to another historical era. “Chug-a chug-a chug-a chug-a Choo! Choo!”<sup>13</sup> The *Bebop Express* is leaving the station, so ride along for a trip to cities in the United States that are major jazz venues, with entertainment at every stop. Departing from New York City, the Sax Man plays a lively horn on the platform.

Next stop, Philly, where Drum Man animates a beat, using garbage cans and building walls for instruments. We hear bass from a Happenin’ Cat in Chicago, and Song Lady boards the train in St. Louis to entertain us with scat, as vocals are her instrument. We head to our final destination in New Orleans where all four of these jazz musicians play in the street, and Song Lady begins her improvisation with “Blee bah, blee bah. / Doot doot ba!”<sup>14</sup> The collage illustrations by Johnson and Fancher provide the energetic appearance of having been pasted together rapidly, as textured colors, discordant lines, and altered segments mirror the vocal patterns of bebop and scat in Panahi’s smooth yet vigorous text.

*Jazz ABZ: An A to Z Collection of Jazz Portraits* (2007) by Wynton Marsalis, immediately takes the reader to the time of LP (Long Play) record albums. This almost square, slightly oversized folio—similar in the image of a 33½ rpm record and complete with facsimile paper sleeve—invites the reader to give this offering a spin. Each “cut” on this “album” is an experimental poem, written by someone who knows jazz and that captures the essence of extraordinary and widely known jazz musicians. Each poem reflects the style of the musician featured, breaking rules but strong in format. The lines of text might be wavy or may be composed of seemingly random words or letter combinations. There are short staccato poems, smooth and melodic poems, as well as soulful poems. Alliteration, syncopation, and rhythm develop the verbal portraits, and Paul Rogers’ accompanying visual portraits seemingly like playbills or album covers themselves, present funky, jazzy, and evocative biographical and musical sketches. Just as albums often included liner notes, there are additional biographical notes appended, and even a discography. This “album” calls to the reader and invites response.

## Poetry Books

Several jazz books, which illuminate musical qualities, build on the natural, melodic nature of poetry. Certainly poetry lends itself to the pattern of movement and may involve a variety of rhythms, both expected and unexpected. For the reader, these qualities, once thought unique to music or poetry separately, are seen in both art forms. Poetry is the improvisation of the language, and these books exemplify this discovery.

*Jazz* (2006) by Walter Dean Myers and illustrated by Christopher Myers, prepares the venue. With poems that create the beat, the Myerses display the roots, from African and European beginnings, to black men blowing blues, ragtime, bebop, gospel from church to cemetery—achieving the uniquely American style that gained worldwide respect. Instruments include drums, bass, sax, trumpet, and piano played by women and men, with women singing sultry vocals. Here jazz is portrayed through body language, with posture that reflects emotion and physical response elicited by the music. A glossary of jazz terms and a jazz timeline complete the jazzy poems that outline the evolution.

We revisit *Jazz on a Saturday Night* (2007) by Leo and Diane Dillon to continue the poetry scene. The book includes the

well-established giants of jazz such as Miles Davis, Max Roach, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Stanley Clarke, and Ella Fitzgerald as they arrive for a Saturday night set. As the music flows from page to page, so do the colors as they intermingle with sparse text simulating the sounds of bass, drums, and saxophone. When Miles Davis takes the stage, the music bursts from his horn into waves of patterns influenced by the African musical motifs. This movement of music flows through the remainder of the book. Brief biographies and a short list of jazz recordings strike the ending chords.



"Song Lady's voice is as smooth as fine silk—" H. L. Panahi, *Bebop Express* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), n.p. Used with permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

*Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World* (2009) by Marilyn Nelson and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney is a brassy book of poetry, with flashy colors of golden yellow and orange, interspersed with the somber browns and olive drabs of World War II. It celebrates the rhythm of strong women united in sound and beat. It's an intersection of trombones and tubas, other band instruments and bugles, saxophones and strings played by an all-female band. These poems celebrate the determination, hardship, and joy of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. The standout combination of jazz, swing, and bebop is as much about the era as it is the music. On each page, the reader finds small bits of musical measures in hot colors of jazz, like papier-mâché, unbound by the rest of the score. The collages are symbolic of the times, as the music straddles the beginnings of the civil rights era and the continued struggles of women's rights, and it beckons the end of war with loud vibrations. Read it in double time, and then read it again.

*i live in music* (1994) is a poem by Ntozake Shange, with paintings by Romare Bearden. Painting and poetry infuse in an unusual blend to stimulate and alert the senses. Wrap the sight of music around yourself as you enter the inventive shapes and colors that reflect the pattern of musical movement. Here you imagine playing jazz yourself, as you groove with syllables and colors. Shange offers a spare, lyrical text, which illuminates the magic of its sensory appeal and pleasures. Paired with the poem are twenty-one extraordinary paintings by Bearden. Bearden often spoke of his work as containing elements of the blues, and that aspect is quite evident when combined with Shange's syncopated, melodic poem.

In *Bird & Diz* (2015), author Gary Golio and illustrator Ed Young present a jazz set featuring Charlie "Bird" Parker and John "Dizzy" Gillespie. Ed Young uses bright pastels on a night-black background to create a neon-esque image on the cover to invite the reader in. Bursts of color throughout mimic the jazzy notes that interplay seamlessly between the two musicians, reinforced in a continuous horizontal panel that is printed and

folded accordion style. Poetic descriptions enhance the visual display, with Diz tagging Bird when it's time to turn the one long page front-to-back. An afterword not only provides additional brief information about Bird and Dizzy, but also recommends two recordings and directs the reader to "pick up your crayons and draw!"<sup>15</sup>

## Biographies

Biographies tell the stories of life's triumphs, sorrows, and inspirations, through an engaging canvas. The jazz greats portrayed—Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie, John Coltrane, Benny Goodman, Teddy Wilson, and Sun Ra (Herman Blount) are depicted in these picture-book biographies that carefully weave the words and illustrations together to feel the music of "jazz" with its boldness, fluidity, and extraordinary movement. The presentation of the music and the lives of the performers that created this music are shared in these outstanding biographies.

*Skit-Scat Raggedy Cat: Ella Fitzgerald* (2010) was written by Roxane Orgill, with illustrations by Sean Qualls. On the first page, readers feel the rhythm of jazz as "Ella cranked the handle on the phonograph, and the three Boswell Sisters crooned"<sup>16</sup> and the movement of color and line begins the story with a ribbon of sound. Readers feel the cadence of the music and are whisked across the page, watching Ella head to Harlem. Qualls' use of red and blue hues is captivating and shows excitement, drawing attention to the movement of the music through fine pencil lines. Ella is depicted as the "rough-tough raggedy cat,"<sup>17</sup> just trying to dance and sing. She steps to the mic, and the sound of jazz seems to emanate from the book. Spread across the pages are rhythmic tones, upbeat spirits of excitement, and downward feelings of despair, until the ribbon of sound appears from her own musical recordings.

*Dizzy* (2006), by Jonah Winter and illustrator Sean Qualls, again uses the ribbon of color, but this time with line and texture to represent the revolutionary, sometimes complicated, and

melodic music of John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie. *Dizzy* tells the story about a “real cool cat”<sup>18</sup> with a trumpet in his hand. And so the story goes, through its rhythmic style and free verse, the reader learns how an angry boy found solace in his trumpet. Various shades of red with black etched borders show how Dizzy blew his anger right out through his horn. The audience, in an unexpected way, through text and illustration, feels the changes taking place in Dizzy’s life. “Playing notes on a page/ what he’d learn to do/ but what he wanted to play / was a thing called ‘jazz.’”<sup>19</sup> Winter tells us jazz was like “breaking the rules, and getting in trouble”<sup>20</sup>—all things Dizzy knew about. So when he played his trumpet, it was fun, intoxicating, making us feel almost giddy and lightheaded. He taught others how to play “dizzy” creating a new crazy kind of jazz called bebop. And perhaps in experiencing *Dizzy*, the opportunity to feel the true depiction of jazz—spontaneity, boldness, and unexpected adventure—is revealed.

*Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane* (2008), written by Carole Boston Weatherford and illustrated by Sean Qualls, is a melancholy and poignant text complemented with moody, textured illustrations in which we learn about the life of Coltrane. In a jazzy, poetic tone, the words spill throughout the text in a rhythmic cadence, even depicted by their placement on the page. The illustrations encapsulate the words, dancing around them, framing the sycophantic sound. This simplistic text is a splendid read for a younger audience as they learn that before he played a single tune or pressed his fingers on the keys, Coltrane listened with his ears.

Throughout all three of these books, Qualls depicts jazz through warm shades of blue, pink, and grey, yet with boldness and movement illuminated on the pages. The fluidity depicted in line and texture sounds the horn and as if one book flows into the other, each portraying a significant contribution to jazz history. Qualls’ books paint a rhythmic picture full of cadence and unexpected nuances known as jazz.

*Mysterious Thelonious* (1997), written and illustrated by Chris Raschka, was based on the composition “Misterioso” by Thelonious Monk. Imagine playing jazz yourself, as you groove with syllables and colors to improvise the meaning of the book. Syllables appear on musical staff-like pages that invite one to literally read the music. A text for older readers, however, this book should be enjoyed as a read aloud and/or accompanied by music, emphasizing its movement and fluidity. Its use with other compositions promises to expand the listener’s understanding of jazz.

Continuing the discussion of jazz biographies is Andrea Davis Pinkney’s *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* (2006) with illustrations by Brian Pinkney. Thumbing through the pages of this strikingly illustrated picture-book biography, we feel the essence of improvisation as Duke’s fingers played “umpy-dump”<sup>21</sup> creating brand new melodies; melodies that set

his “fingers to wiggling.”<sup>22</sup> The ebb and flow of the text swirling around Duke’s head create a rhythmic pattern of musical movement, the rhythm of jazz.

As Duke’s band the Washingtonians played at the Cotton Club, one can almost hear the offbeat tunes and “musical stream swell over the airwaves.”<sup>23</sup> Swaths of color and line in the illustrations are fluid, like jazz music itself. And the scratchboard illustrations reinforce and represent the scintillating essence of the music. “Duke told his band to play whatever came to mind—to improvise their solos. To make the music fly! And they did.”<sup>24</sup> And so the band plays on that musical beat with a sassy twist. The dancers in the story come to life, swinging and dancing to the “Hot-buttered bop.”<sup>25</sup>

*The Cosmobiography of Sun Ra* (2014), written and illustrated by Chris Raschka, and *Benny Goodman & Teddy Wilson: Taking the Stage as the First Black-and-White Jazz Band in History* (2014) by Lesa Cline-Ransome and illustrated by James E. Ransome continue the conversation of biographies.

Multiple Caldecott Award–winner Raschka presents a biography of avant-garde jazz musician Sun Ra, who faced the harshness of segregation, but believed that music had a universal appeal and went about sharing his talents with racially integrated audiences. Similarly, in *Benny Goodman & Teddy Wilson*, Goodman and Wilson’s relationship was iconic at the time, breaking the rules. But “the audiences were ready, and they stayed, and they grew, and they cheered . . . for a black-and-white band.”<sup>26</sup> And they danced, as the musicians confidently played clarinet, vibraphone, piano, and bass drum depicted so stylistically in the illustrations.

Raschka brings a new dimension to the art form and captures the fluidity and excitement of jazz music. Bold hues, dramatic lines, staccato repetition, and the use of musical staff as backdrop to the illustrations all invite the reader to ponder the life of Sun Ra. “Sun Ra always said that he came from Saturn”<sup>27</sup> and Raschka symbolizes his journey to Earth with a hovering presence of the cosmos throughout this picture-book biography.

These biographies provide the audience with a chance to feel, hear, and touch the essence of jazz. Improvisation, rhythm, and syncopation are boldly stated throughout these books. The authors’ and illustrators’ artistic crafts create duets between the illustrations and the texts that radiate the sounds and rhythmic spirits of jazz musicians. Read them and experience the artwork, which can be elusive, playful, and bursting with energy all at the same time.

Jazz books should be read numerous times, with each encounter one should explore their cadence, their musical patterns, and rhythmic beat. These books are not quiet, but when shared with readers they evoke a sense of movement, excitement, as if hearing the jazz music through the pages. 🎷

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