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Being Prez: The Life and Music of Lester Young

By Dave Gelly



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Being Prez: The Life and Music of Lester Young By Dave Gelly

Lester Young was one of the great jazz masters, and his impact on the course of the art form was profound. He fundamentally changed the way the saxophone was played--his long, flowing lines brought new levels of expressiveness and subtlety to the jazz language, setting the standard for all modern players. In *Being Prez*, renowned British critic Dave Gelly follows Lester Young through his life in a rapidly changing world, showing how the music of this exceptionally sensitive man was shaped by his experiences. The reader meets a complicated, vulnerable, gentle individual who was brought up in his father's traveling carnival band. His early career was spent in the nightclubs and dancehalls of Kansas City and the Southwest, and he made his landmark recording debut at the peak of the Swing Era. But at the height of his powers, he was drafted into the US Army, where racism and his own unworldliness landed him in military prison. Following these events, Young grew increasingly withdrawn and suspicious, changes in his character reflected in the darkening mood of his music. Gelly, himself a jazz saxophonist, examines many of Young's classic recordings in illuminating detail. He reveals how as a saxophonist--and as major contributor to the Count Basie band--Young created a strong personal voice, a cool modernism, and a new rhythmic flexibility in the freely dancing rhythms of 4-beat swing. With his sax jutting oddly to one side, his bizarre oblique use of language, and his unique musical rapport with Billie Holiday (who famously nicknamed him "Prez"), Lester Young has become an icon and a cult figure. This marvelous biography illuminates the life and work of this giant of jazz.



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Editorial Review

Review

"For those looking for an introduction to Young's life and music, Gelly offers the virtues of a thorough, book-length liner note, which, to his purpose, integrates life, times, and music."--John McDonough, *Downbeat*

"An outstanding book, covering the life and music of a truly unique musician, by one of the most perceptive and literate jazz writers. Eminently readable from the first page to the last, *Being Prez* is an essential addition to the jazz library."--Alun Morgan, *Jazz Journal International*

"This exemplary and concise study is illuminated by the author's straight-ahead prose. While fully aware of the musical and biographical details, Gelly wears his knowledge lightly in a way that will appeal to general readers as well as specialists." --Brian Priestley, author of *Chasin' The Bird* and co-author of *The Rough Guide to Jazz*

"Lester Young, one of the most glorious but elusive figures in jazz history, is brought to life by Dave Gelly in this splendid introduction, which combines a brief yet layered biography with insightful musical commentary. Old and new fans alike will find illumination in Gelly's first-rate discussion of 'Shoe Shine Boy,' his account of Young's dealings with Fletcher Henderson and Norman Granz, and his description of Young's notorious stint in the army."--Gary Giddins, author *Natural Selection* and *Weather Bird*

"A masterful new biography."--Nat Hentoff, *The Weekly Standard*

"Tracing an odd life and elusive legacy with exactitude, Gelly writes with a rare reserve--a concision and perception, really--that his subject would have appreciated. In so doing, Gelly shows his own modernist stripes: playing only the right notes, embracing contextual space, emphasizing the song above all else."--*The Atlantic*

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"Highly readable." --*Ellingtonia*

About the Author

Dave Gelly is the weekly jazz critic for *The Observer* and contributes to many other British periodicals. Named Jazz Writer of the Year in the 1999 British Jazz Awards, Gelly has hosted a weekly radio show, has contributed to many books on jazz, has written liner notes for most major jazz record labels, and is the author of *Stan Getz: Nobody Else But Me*. He was invested with the MBE by HM The Queen in 2005. He is also professional saxophonist.

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