

# Philip Larkin and the Rosebud Shuffle

By Dave Gelly



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There are some writers on jazz to whom I turn for knowledge and informed insight (not many, admittedly), but only two that I pick up for sheer enjoyment. The first is Humphrey Lyttelton, because he wears his passion for the subject so lightly and is so effortlessly funny, and the second is Philip Larkin. In his case there should be no need

to say anything further, beyond pointing out that the felicity of language which made him one of the 20th century's finest poets extends to all his writing, including that on the subject of jazz. But, in the world of jazz commentary and criticism, Larkin's name is never mentioned – except occasionally, as the target of oafish abuse. Everything about

him seems calculated to enrage the *bien pensant* – his Toryism, his alleged sexism and racism, his rejection of Modernism in all its forms, his fogeyish harping on about old jazz names they never heard of, like Billy Banks and Red McKenzie, and, worst of all, the gleeful elegance with which he lowers the boom on some of the most revered figures in the modern jazz Pantheon. Coltrane's tone, for instance, is a 'vinegary drizzle'. Monk's chords are 'like suitcases just too full to shut properly'. Miles Davis sounds miserable most of the time, his drooping notes the aural equivalent of Dali's melting watches (Dali being a prime example of what Larkin regarded as the solemn absurdity and self-importance of modern art). And so on.

Modern jazz came to him as a nasty shock when, in 1961, he accepted the job of jazz critic for the *Daily Telegraph* ('the notorious Tory rag', as his detractors would no doubt add). He had not listened to any new jazz records for years, but felt confident that once he'd 'got the feel of it all', it would be an enjoyable task. However, to his dismay, he discovered that all the things he had loved about jazz – its joviality, its tunefulness, its 'rips, slurs and distortions' – had been dropped in favour of something 'pinched, unhappy, febrile'. The best part of two decades had passed since the flood-tide of his youthful infatuation and he had been handed everything from Charlie Parker to Ornette Coleman in one large, untidy heap and left to get on with it. Which, with growing exasperation, he proceeded to do. But the Larkin who protested so entertainingly about Coltrane, Monk et al was also the Larkin who perked up no end when one of his favourites came steaming into view – Bubber Miley, with his 'snarling, gobbling savagery', or the revered Pee Wee Russell's 'lurid snuffling' and 'asthmatic voicelessness'. That is Larkin the jazz writer that I most enjoy reading. He is a marvellous appreciator, rather like Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who once famously began a book review with, 'Where shall we begin our praise of this delightful work?'

Much attention has, quite rightly, been paid to the famous Introduction to *All What Jazz*, the anthology of his *Telegraph* reviews first published in 1970, because that is where he sets out, in vivid polemic, his objection to the whole idea of 'modernism' in the arts. But Larkin's predicament with