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West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945-1960

Ted Gioia

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Over the last half-century, New York's pre-eminence in the world of jazz has been challenged only once--during the 1950s--when California emerged with a splash on the jazz scene. "West Coast jazz," as it soon became known, was a fresh new sound which stirred both controversy and excitement in equal measure. One thing, however, was certain: never before (or since) had so many jazz musicians from the Coast made such an impact on jazz. Dave Brubeck, Dexter Gordon, Art Pepper, Chet Baker, Eric Dolphy, Paul Desmond, Ornette Coleman, Cal Tjader, Shelly Manne, and numerous others--these figures shaped the jazz of their time and are still powerful influences today.
In *West Coast Jazz*, Ted Gioia provides the definitive account of this rich, evocative music. Drawing on years of research and numerous first-hand interviews, Gioia tells the full story of West Coast jazz, from its early stirrings after World War II to its decline after 1960. He traces its growth from its origins on Central Avenue, the heart of LA's post-war black culture, "an elongated Harlem set down by the Pacific," where hotels such as the Dunbar (where Jack Johnson opened a nightclub) and nightspots such as the Club Alabam and The Downbeat attracted the likes of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and any number of visiting jazz luminaries. He describes one of the pivotal moments in the genesis of West Coast jazz, the night Dizzy and Bird opened at Billy Berg's Vine Street club, a legendary performance that sparked California's love affair with jazz. And he traces its blossoming at the Blackhawk, the Lighthouse, Bop City, the Haig and a host of other legendary California nightspots. Along the way, Gioia not only provides colorful portraits of leading jazz figures--such as Dexter Gordon, a stoop to his walk, carrying his tenor in a sack under his arm--and thoughtful commentary on their music, but he also discusses many unsung figures as well. Perhaps most important, though, is his lengthy look at Dave Brubeck, which is by far the best biography ever written of this influential musician.
West Coast jazz gradually declined as the 1950s gave way to the rock-dominated '60s, but this decade-long renaissance remains one of the great stories of jazz history, and nobody has told it as well as Ted Gioia does here. His love of this music shines on every page.

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