

Phil Pastras. *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xx, 246 pp.

Reviewed by Kathy J. Ogren

Author Phil Pastras opens his biographical study of legendary pianist Jelly Roll Morton with an epigram from poet Dylan Thomas—"Oh make me a mask"—and with that signal, *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West* takes us on the road with trickster Ferdinand Joseph LaMenthe, a.k.a. Jelly Roll. Pastras appreciates the facility with which Morton, like many African American jazz musicians, used performative masks to strategize resilient careers in a capricious music business. Pastras writes: "Morton was a man of many masks, especially at the beginning of his career: pool hustler, card shark, pimp, vaudevillian, pianist, composer and bandleader. He did not focus exclusively on the music until after his five year stay on the West Coast, from 1917 to 1923" (6). Acknowledging the examples set by Ralph Ellison (1964) and Albert Murray (1976) in their essays on the ritual importance of donning masks in performance, Pastras sets out to find "what the mask tells us about its maker" (12). And the setting for this exploration—the American West—locates Jelly Roll as a rambler who reinvents himself and finds his defining identity on the American frontier.

Any study of Morton must first contend with the main source of his self-invention (in addition to his recordings) that Jelly Roll left for posterity. That text is, of course, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz,"* which Morton recorded with folklorist Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress in 1938 (Lomax [1950] 1972). *Mister Jelly Roll* is a classic in the jazz autobiographical tradition. Morton, like many jazz musicians, followed the lead taken by Louis Armstrong in his 1936 autobiography *Swing That Music*, the text that inaugurated the first generation of jazz autobiographies shortly after the start of the Swing Era. Armstrong, as well as dozens of musicians who published autobiographies after him, wrote the stories of their lives to complement their most profound autobiographical statements—musical performances.

Early jazzmen had clear and long memories of the public debate about jazz that characterized the Jazz Age of the 1920s. They remembered well the unsympathetic critics who ridiculed the music or labeled it as degenerate, and in their autobiographical responses many musicians developed legitimating strategies, for example, opening their narratives with the prom-

ise to tell "the real story." Significantly, musicians often emphasized their pioneering status in jazz history as a way of acknowledging their ability to survive this racially-charged battle to legitimate their art. Not only did jazzmen travel out West to the "territories," including isolated locations in Texas, Wyoming, and Montana, they also described their role as symbolic pioneers. Early jazz musicians, both in their explicit statements of intent and in the narrative strategies they employed, performed texts demonstrating the richness of possible meanings implied by the concept of the frontier. Jazz musicians also related their pioneering experiences through a legitimating narrative strategy that emphasized self-communication through a language rooted in musical performance. In his desire to claim his place in the jazz pantheon, Morton was not alone. In addition to *Swing That Music*, autobiographies by Sidney Bechet (1975) and Danny Barker (1986) also testify to the beginnings of the music and are determined to provide an authentic narrative of the origins of jazz.¹

Morton's autobiography provides a rich and provocative example of this process, and because Pastras introduces the Library of Congress recordings in his preface to *Dead Man Blues*, Morton's version of his own life frames the rest of Pastras's biographical text. Pastras acknowledges the strengths of *Mister Jelly Roll*. For example, because Morton combined oral history with performance, Pastras salutes Morton's ability to provide direct commentary on his musical compositions, which Morton discusses with intellectual seriousness (xiv–xv). Pastras also points to the importance of the social history Morton preserves for us: "Morton continued to spin his tale, with every word he spoke and every note he played, he saved from oblivion another piece of American cultural history" (xiii). But as Pastras notes, *Mister Jelly Roll* is compromised by Lomax's influence. The taped versions of the interviews are not always accurately transcribed into the written text Lomax first published in 1950, and because Lomax sometimes "put words into" Morton's mouth, his "methods are questionable" (xix).² Thus even the main source of information for Morton's life cannot be read as reliable. Pastras's *Dead Man Blues* aims to set the record straight.

In so doing, Pastras enters the complicated arena of oral storytelling, where even the simplest versions of the past can set off a firestorm. This is of course what Jelly Roll himself initiated when he challenged the assertion that W. C. Handy originated jazz, which was reported on a March 1938 Ripley's *Believe It or Not* radio program. Morton responded by claiming his own stake in the question through letters to the radio program and to the press, insisting he was the *real* originator (1). Wordsmiths like Morton relished a good jam with words just as much as they did one that relied solely on their instruments, which Pastras clearly demonstrates. In another example, Pastras relates the well-known story of how Jelly got his

name by essentially playing the dozens on stage with another performer (14–15).

The authenticity of the jazz musician's tale is rooted in the capacity to translate African American oral performance into written texts through the use of jokes, anecdotes, stories, lies, folklore, and practical jokes. These autobiographical acts, despite mediation by amanuenses like Lomax, illustrate the musicians' mastery of what cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and others before him have identified as Signifyin(g). Gates describes the process as one in which African Americans "revise texts in the western tradition," often seeking "to do so authentically, with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular" (1988:45–46). Pastras appreciates this skill in Morton, noting its usefulness in vaudeville, including acts where Jelly Roll performed in black-face. Pastras also recognizes the conflicted legacy minstrelsy conferred on performers like Morton; it would be interesting to hear more about how Morton's adaptation to "masking" compares with contemporaries such as Louis Armstrong and Bert Williams.

Drawing on the concept of theatrical masking and oral signifying, Pastras wants to test Morton's performances against the historical record. He intends to bring Jelly Roll and his world "back to life in the minds of my readers" (xviii), and he does so in several ways. He tries to find the truth about those events misrepresented by either Morton or Lomax. He tests Jelly Roll's storytelling against the memories and documents of those who knew him, hoping to distinguish the truth from "lies." This is a process that Pastras calls "Prelude to a Riff" in his first chapter, and each subsequent chapter asks what is true and what is performance as Pastras revisits significant aspects of Morton's career. Pastras also explores the dynamics of the sporting life, which shaped Morton's options, much as it did the early life of Louis Armstrong and other New Orleans musicians. Pausing to explore pivotal moments in Morton's rise and fall as a prominent performer, Pastras discusses the circumstances surrounding signature recordings such as "The Pearls," "Wolverine Blues," and "King Porter Stomp." Pastras's most innovative challenge to the norms of the historical record comes in his focus on Jelly Roll Morton's relationship with Anita Gonzales. A fellow performer and entertainment entrepreneur, Gonzales and Morton became lovers when he moved out west; her influence continued to shape the rest of Morton's life, according to Pastras.

Pastras relies on the works of scholars who have previously filled in many of the gaps about Jelly Roll Morton's life (e.g., Lawrence Gushee 1981–82, 1985; Peter Pullman n.d.; Laurie Wright 1980). Pastras also introduces important primary sources, in particular Jelly Roll's scrapbook, apparently inherited by Anita Gonzales. These materials eventually became the Henry Villalapando Ford Collection, now housed in the Historic

New Orleans Collection (New Orleans, Louisiana). All of these sources provide corroborative information about the private Jelly Roll, for example his family lineage, as determined by Gushee, or the actual dates and times of performances and recordings, as provided by Pullman and Wright. Pastras devotes an entire chapter to the scrapbook, interpreting the ways in which it served as a record of accomplishments, possibly soothing Morton's wounded ego. (It is interesting to note that Louis Armstrong also kept scrapbooks and collages of newspaper clippings, reviews, and commentaries on his performances.)

But the most intriguing aspect of Pastras's study is his use of Jelly's travels and career in the West to reorient the dominant geography of this jazz legend. If we accept the premise that the narrative provided by Morton to Lomax represents the established version of Jelly Roll's life—i.e., that he started in New Orleans and moved north with jazz—Pastras complicates that pattern. Pastras, intrigued by the mysteries surrounding Morton's last months in Los Angeles, starts from the end—Jelly Roll's death in the arms of Anita Gonzales at a Los Angeles hospital in 1941. By working backwards, so to speak, Pastras asks us to see how and why Jelly would choose to end his life far away from home and his wife Mabel Bertrand Morton, and he explains how the lure of California can illuminate the rest of Morton's life and career. The biography is organized with this question in mind.

Pastras's focus on Morton's West Coast years and experiences necessarily privileges the role of two women: Anita Gonzales (who wrote the lyrics to "Dead Man Blues") and his godmother Laura Hunter, also known as Eulalie Echo. Pastras successfully brings the histories of these two women into the narrative in order to establish Morton's family and personal connections to voodoo (his godmother was a practitioner) and to Anita, a woman he knew for over forty years, from 1901 to 1941. The inclusion of these two women in Jelly's biography is one of the most significant ways that Pastras brings unknown or unappreciated aspects of Jelly Roll Morton's life into recorded history. And both women—Anita in particular—help establish the prominence of California as a personal and musical high point for Morton.

As a Creole of color who successfully passed as Caucasian, Anita mastered her own masks of identity. She moved to Las Vegas as early as 1908, before Morton would take his own first trip west. She left behind a husband and child in Biloxi, Mississippi, and her married name, Bessie Seymour. Pastras explores the many ways that Anita might have manipulated the color line as either a white or Hispanic woman in order to establish herself as a successful businesswoman. The saloon (and most likely brothel) that Anita ran in Vegas was located on "Block 16," a street that Pastras recreates with photographs. It "looks like the set for a cowboy movie: the dust, the palpably bright hot desert sun, the men in cowboy hats lounging

on the shaded porch of the Arizona Club" (41). The reputation of the block reinforces the Wild West stereotype of Anita's frontier; it served as the home for gambling, saloons, and prostitution, "wild west central" (43–44). Anita and Jelly Roll joined forces and traveled throughout the West, and she probably provided the backing for some of his business ventures, including the Original Creole Band he fronted in Los Angeles.

Anita and Morton both developed close ties to Laura Hunter, who moved west after Jelly Roll, settling in Los Angeles. She brought with her a strong reputation as a "good voodoo woman" (57). Pastras finds this connection telling, since Hunter's death provided the rationale for his final journey west to Los Angeles, despite his life-threatening heart condition. Jelly himself, fearful of voodoo curses, may have been seeking help and solace in the "family" where he felt most at home—Anita's. Pastras provides a persuasive reading of the lyrics of "Dead Man Blues," pointing to its possible voodoo overtones, which further supports his case that Anita's influence over Jelly Roll remained the most important one in his life (59–60).

In addition to personal connections, the West also provided Morton with numerous career opportunities. Pastras provides a detailed account of Jelly's gigs in Los Angeles from 1917 to 1923, and again in the last days of 1940–41. Pastras develops the interesting point that Morton participated in the Great Migration of the early twenties by engaging in an ongoing journey across the West. Morton played in numerous locations, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Tacoma, Casper (Wyoming), Denver, Vancouver, San Diego, Tijuana, and possibly Alaska. Pastras evaluates the successes and failures of these ventures, and includes descriptions of Jelly's mercurial fortunes as a gambler, fight promoter, and pimp. Because Morton had reasonable success on the West Coast, Pastras argues that these years became the golden past that Morton sought to regain at the end of his life. He supports this in part by pointing to eight previously unknown compositions that Morton brought west with him in 1940, which have recently been found in the William Russell Collection. These seem to indicate that Morton hoped to bring more of his music into a big band format (182–83).

Pastras imbues Jelly Roll Morton's travels with legendary purpose, comparing him at times to Odysseus. Pastras writes: "Of all the various aspects of Morton's persona, this one lies closest to his heart; he was, as they say, 'made for the part'—the vagabond minstrel, the man of many wiles and talents who never fails to come up with a way to get the next meal, the next gig, the next train ticket, and who has learned to exploit the role of Stranger in Town to the full" (76). Although Jelly Roll Morton certainly experienced some of the same unpredictable fortunes as the Greek hero,

Pastras really doesn't demonstrate that he accomplished a similar kind of quest. Once Jelly returned to the East Coast, he found his losses out-running his gains, his reputation underappreciated. Pastras discusses Morton's struggles to keep performing, to record, and to help manage the Jungle Inn in Washington, D.C. This is the nightclub where he was stabbed by an irate patron, which contributed to Morton's declining health. Finally, Pastras concludes, Morton returned to Los Angeles where he hoped for better days and solace in Anita's company. Morton fled west through terrible blizzards for the elusive promise of opportunity and long lost affection.

Fans of Jelly Roll Morton and his music will find this a fascinating read, one that offers careful evidence to compare with Jelly's claims about himself, and with others' claims about him. Pastras examines Morton's will and its probate in depth. Pastras himself is cautious in his own judgments. For example, he accords Morton qualified support as the man who first distinguished jazz from ragtime in terms of musical criteria, although he was not, of course, the sole originator of the music (2-3). Pastras does discuss important performances and recording sessions, but musical history and musicological analysis are not Pastras's primary concern. The plot of *Dead Man Blues* is exactly as the author promises—a "riff" about the elusiveness of real identity that is repeatedly improvised upon in each chapter. This structure pays a playful tribute to jazz improvisation, but it means that the reader reads some of the same points over and over again, which becomes somewhat redundant. For instance, Pastras makes it clear early on that he will examine the final events surrounding Jelly Roll's death; unfortunately, the actual last chapter becomes anti-climactic.

Pastras interviewed participants who provided valuable first-hand observations about Jelly Roll's activities, including musicians and friends who knew Morton in his last days. Pastras himself speculates at various points about the "real" story and the authentic character of Morton, as is the case when he wonders about Morton's sexuality (16-17) or when he relates various stories about what might have happened to Morton's legendary front tooth diamond, which disappeared at his death (170-71). Thus Pastras, too, becomes a participant in the creation of Morton's performances. Such a narrative may frustrate those who would like clear chronological direction and a more straightforward recitation of jazz history, but *Dead Man Blues* serves us well as a biographical tribute that communicates the inexplicable in jazz music and its creators. With *Dead Man Blues*, Pastras has provided a study similar to those by Peter Guarlnick (1989), Samuel Charters (1984), and Donald M. Marquis (1978). All of these capture the writer's performance as he recreates a legendary figure in music history—without ever truly revealing the men behind the masks.

Notes

1. Many other early jazzmen and women have written or authorized autobiographies. For analyses of jazz autobiography and their contexts, see William H. Kenney III, "Negotiating the Color Line: Louis Armstrong's Autobiographies" and Kathy Ogren, "Jazz Isn't Just Me: Jazz Autobiographies as Performance Personas" in Buckner and Weiland (1991). Thomas Brothers's study of Louis Armstrong (1999) is also very helpful on this topic.

2. Alan Lomax's *Mr. Jelly Roll* was originally published by Duell, Sloane, and Pearce in New York. It is based on Library of Congress recordings of "piano solos, singing, and talking" entitled "Saga of Mr. Jelly Lord" (LC 1638 to 1688 and 2487 to 2489, recorded May–June 1938).

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