

A Kenny Dorham Poetic Riff

KD: A Jazz Biography

by Dave Oliphant

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192 pp. \$19.95 cloth.

Reviewed by
Jason Coates

Successful biographers often must convince readers why their subject's life deserves public attention. Their task requires intense interest and love for their subject. In *KD: A Jazz Biography*, Dave Oliphant certainly demonstrates a love for his subject, Kenny Dorham, and leaves little unsaid. Oliphant unapologetically crams his verse with facts even if the experience of his verse doesn't automatically tell us who McKinley "Kenny" Dorham was. Although *KD: A Jazz Biography* sustains a historical quality, readers are given few concrete visions of Dorham beyond basic chronology. As a result, Oliphant's unconventional text places demands on the reader and offers a more linguistic portrait of this premier but overlooked jazz composer, arranger, and trumpeter.

If readers pick up this book simply expecting to learn about the tumultuous life and times of Kenny Dorham, they might feel confounded and possibly annoyed. But if they want to hear the actual mood and soak in the atmosphere of KD's music, Oliphant will take them for a spin.

Each chapter highlights KD's milestones, and the text sporadically references names, dates, compositions, recordings, and performances. Oliphant has taken on more than KD as his subject: at its best, this book depicts the jazz scene that Dorham and his contemporaries founded, endured, and revolutionized. Oliphant delivers impressively dizzying abstract accounts of KD's life and makes frequent historical references and literary allusions. Although Kenny Dorham might seem like a minor character of his time, Oliphant provides the socio-historical context through a whirlwind of language, collecting and dispensing facts with whips and turns in various directions. The

book brings KD into focus and gives him a spotlight he never had in life.

Oliphant's decision to arrange his biography into rhymed quatrains proves fitting: the form mirrors its content. The lack of punctuation and capitalization are breaks with literary convention that heighten the book's rhythmic structure and emphasize its varied rhyme



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scheme. At times, the syntax becomes jarring, and the tone becomes suddenly elevated, yet at other moments one reads pages without a single stutter or misstep. Oliphant glides through his text as if he were recording a jazz album himself, and the reader becomes a participant in this well-timed live performance. Here, one is reminded of Jack Kerouac's mad dance between dashes:

K rather digging deeper into emotive veins

exploring the subterranean
subtlety of tone
in a melodic mother lode of the
tune's own
harmonic mine layered with a
lover's pains

& even if must doubt ^t hose over-
seas troops
would've sent in '43 their constant
requests
from Canal or carrier or bombardier
groups
for K's rendition of that song
Helen Forrest

The poetic rhythm is not the only redeeming device Oliphant employs. Aware of how easy it would be to get lost in the mundane cataloging of people, song titles, group names, cities, and streets, the text becomes rife with word play. When writing of KD's fidelity, Oliphant delights in innuendo:

where Ken's candor lies in the
clarity of
his straight-ahead funky staccato
tongue
trustworthy & not fooling around
as Son-

ny's does though the tenor's witty
asides

In such moments of ardent attention to language, readers clearly see and feel Oliphant's admiration for KD. Writing successful poetry demands a sensitivity to language that surmounts the conventional aesthetics of biography. Although Oliphant's vision of Kenny Dorham offers some informative knowledge about the musician's life, career, and social circle, the greater achievement here lies in Oliphant's spiraling musical lines, in his creative rhythms and rhymes, and in his deep understanding of poetic language. ★

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