



Sound Off: a book of jazz

Stephen Bett

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Stephen Bett's 12th book, *Sound Off: a book of jazz*, is loosely, a "serial" poem, a book of 76 linked poems, each responding (himself as a jazz fan) to the work of 76 very current jazz musicians. These "jazzers", as he calls them, are not the old tried & true names we all know—they fall, very roughly, into three general camps: the "sons of Miles" (Jarrett, Hancock, Corea, McLaughlin, Scofield, Shorter, etc.); the ECM artists (largely Norwegian, the very contemporary sound coming from jazz's second centre these days) & very young (20-something), hip, interesting, & mostly NYC-based musicians. Whether readers have heard of names like Bill Frisell or Ketil Bjørnstad will not matter. This is a book of poems celebrating music (almost all the poems are laudatory; a small few are askancely critical). But essentially they are poems for readers—no jazz expertise required. Like Bett's most recent work, the poems tend toward the "minimalist"—which also works with the musical subject. Structurally, the poems work in a sequence, with language, images, ideas, echoing throughout the book. The arrangement is simple, the names of the musicians alphabetized to set eliminate ranking or preference. Bett has said that all his writing life been trying to reach toward Zukofsky's ideal language for poetry as "upper register music: song"—his last 3 or 4 books were getting closer and *Sound Off* just might be the closest yet.

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Arthur Bennett:

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