

Paul Kerswill posted on Facebook (May 2013). I'm no jazz expert or even aficionado, but Miles Davis is indispensable for me. I'm also pleased to recall that one of my favourite linguists, Jack Chambers, is Davis's most distinguished biographer.
<http://www.jazzprocess.com/2010/05/jack-chambers-a-passion-for-language-and-learning/>

Jack Chambers: a passion for language and learning

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This is the first in a series of posts introducing people who have endorsed the *Jazz Process*. May 20, 2010

To those in the world of jazz he is Jack Chambers, jazz biographer and journalist, perhaps best known as the author of *Milestones: The Music and Times of Miles Davis*, the definitive biography of the pioneering jazz trumpeter. The book was first published in 1983 and 1985 by Beech Tree Books and was instantly a classic. Intricately researched, rich in detail, superbly organized and thoroughly engaging, the book is so good that copious parts of it somehow ended up in the autobiography penned by Davis and Quincy Troupe. Chambers addressed this issue in a new introduction he wrote for the book when it was republished in 1998 by Da Capo Press. His latest jazz literary masterwork, *Bouncin' With Bartok: The Incomplete Works of Richard Twardzik*, is a biography of jazz pianist, Richard Twardzik. Unlike Davis who is possibly the most well known of jazz legends, Twardzik is known by few and his brilliant career was cut short at the age of 24 when he died of a heroin overdose while on a European tour with Chet Baker. To accurately recount the short career of a little known figure is no small feat but Chambers did it as brilliantly as he does everything else.

Chambers's knowledge of jazz is far-ranging and over the years he has written about many other jazz musicians including Duke Ellington and Gil Evans. I was fortunate enough to have Jack present at a **Gil Evans tribute concert** I presented a few years ago. He contributed to the **programme notes** and I took the opportunity to have him sign my copy of *Milestones*. That was the first time, and to date the only time, I have asked an author to sign a book.

As notable as Chambers's contributions are to jazz, writing about his favorite music is

not his only gig. As J. K. Chambers he is known as a professor, researcher and author in the field of linguistics. He has pioneered research in Canadian English and has been a visiting professor at universities throughout the world. He has also parlayed his expertise into linguistics into a third career as a forensics consultant, testifying as an expert witness on such esoteric topics such as the language of pornography at obscenity trials.

Whether it's jazz or linguistics, Chambers has excelled through his passion for learning and sharing knowledge. His response to the question, "*Is there a connection between language and music for you?*" posed in a 2005 interview, is insightful:

... music and language do have common ground. Both have syntax and phonology, and if I am good at talking about them it is because I can use the same analytic skills on both. Linguistic structure is, of course, hard-wired and irrepressibly human. Musical structure is not hard-wired but learned, and learned with great effort for the greatest practitioners. But it is also uniquely human, and I suspect that it takes its form by spinning off our language faculty, like a kind of satellite. And jazz is especially language-like, because musicians use the syntax and phonology to construct motifs (phrases and sentences) and melodies (discourses) that no one has ever heard before, and they do it spontaneously, just as speakers do in ordinary conversation, except that at its very best it is more like a poem than like ordinary conversation. And how they do it, no one knows. Every three-year-old can do that with language. But only the most gifted musicians can do it in music.

It's always a pleasure and a learning experience to read anything that Jack has written. Of course the subject matter is usually of great interest but the man knows his way around words as you would expect him to and his turn of phrase is always artful. I actually found it quite daunting to contribute to programme notes alongside his writing. It was similarly intimidating to ask him to review my manuscript with the thought of providing an endorsement. Ever the gentleman he not only provided a testimonial but with just a few simple words, "*Adrian– You write as well as you do all those other things,*" he encouraged a budding author.

If you've not read *Milestones*, I encourage you to put it on your reading list as it is simply one of the best jazz biographies around and everyone can do well to know about Miles Davis. If you've read *Milestones*, check out *Bouncin' With Bartok* for a rare insight into the lost talent of Dick Twardzik. You can also find Chambers's jazz writing in *Coda* magazine.

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