



High Times, Hard Times

Anita O'Day, George Eells

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(Limelight). ..".in the tradition of the best jazz autobiographies...a fascinating travelogue through the jazz world, filled with vivid images of Gene Krupa, Stan Kenton, Roy Eldridge and Billie Holiday...Her prose is as hip as her music." The New York Times Book Review

High Times, Hard Times Details

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Marla says

3-1/2* I'll just admit it up front. I'd never heard of Anita O'Day. I read this for a book club. I'm glad I did. What a gift to be introduced to her. I listened to her music while reading the book, which I highly suggest. She has just the most sultry voice.

What I really liked about this book was that Anita used her own voice. I really got a feeling for the kind of person she was. I loved her expressions, things like "man that cat could play!" Sure a little outdated now, but it put me into her time frame. I also enjoyed that it was about her life and struggles, not a lot of over my head jazz lingo. She was a no nonsense kind of woman and seemed to live life on her own terms.

The writing was so-so, but then she wasn't a writer. I'm guessing this book would be a must for anyone interested in jazz vocalists.

Cori says

I had a lot of fun reading this book; looking up all the songs and artists she writes about as I went along. Some I already knew and some I look forward to exploring more. (Has anyone read the Baby Dodds Story?) I found Anita's story very sad. She was very talented and very naive. She was so completely into singing that the world moved on without her. She lived in her own sheltered world. She was only happy when she was on the stage and never quite learned what to do when she wasn't up there improvising with the band.

She did a very good job of listing all her accomplishments, recordings and gigs etc. (Never in a boastful way which I found very endearing) I get the impression that she was not a very emotionally available person (can't think of a better word). All of her relationships sound empty and deprived of any type of love or closeness. This could be why I felt the book lacked a certain....feeling. I wanted to get a sense of what this period in time was like. How did it "feel" to be on the leading edge of a new kind of sound on the music scene? (How many other white chicks were scatting???) Did the racism between performers make her angry? Did she feel any competition from other singers? And what about when everyone was getting drafted? So many people came and went and she seems to be indifferent to them all. She states all the facts but never shares how she felt about these issues.

She is honest about her drug use but it is not the main focus of the book. The story always comes back to the music. As it should. She will be remembered as an innovative and creative "song stylist."

Brent Mckay says

Fascinating. That this brave, rule-shattering woman lived to 87 should make you rethink most of what you assume.

Mary Narkiewicz says

Down to earth, honest autobiography by a very likable lady and great jazz singer - Anita O'day. She describes her long addiction to heroin, drug abuse, ups and downs, love affairs.. one of my favorite parts of the book is towards the end when she speaks of a family she met up with.. she was always meeting characters..

"The whole family was mixed up because the mother was el dinko and all four children were inkle dinkles" .. not sure what that means, but it got my attention!

She describes the time Barbra Streisand came to her show wearing dark glasses and waiting to learn from her "music teacher" ..and the time when Judy Garland and her husband Mickey Deans were her room mates.. Judy was taking all kinds of pills and died in London shortly after the room mate episode..

GK Stritch says

Hardboiled dame? Yes, but the feathers, gloves, and frock, soften the edges.

j george says

To hear a great musician talk about her work is the best part of this for me. Anita o day was always underrated during the jazz revival, so I was fascinated to read of her original popularity . She is completely unsentimental which makes this a really straightforward read. The authors create a vibrant sense of place and time - particularly in her youth and early work, and is reminiscent of Eddie condon's classic "They called it music" . Anita doesn't dwell on regrets and mistakes and her determined positivity seems to have sustained her through some hard times. If you like her singing, this book will flesh out the woman behind that remarkable voice.

Angela Joyce says

She had a personality to match her voice! Amazing book.

Annette says

I've been semi-obsessed with Anita O'Day since hearing Let Me Off Uptown when I was a junior in high school.

Her voice was just.so.cooooool - controlled, teasing, arch, smooth - and it's gratifying to learn what went into that style and sound. I love a survivor story, especially one with a central character as talented, wry, glamorous, and yes, cool, as Anita O'Day.

Frank says

Had read an excerpt from this a few years back in "Reading Jazz" edited by Robert Gottlieb. It was stark and harrowing. The section excerpted was about Anita O'Day's heroin addiction and described how fixing became her focus every day for several years in her life.

Now that I have finished the memoir I realize that this piece was not entirely representative.

Anita is honest throughout - self-critical, proud of her strengths but well aware of her weaknesses -but her 15 year addiction did not define her.

Her music did.

She does not claim to be a singer but a song stylist. Interesting distinction.

She was certainly talented, creative and strong despite her self-destructiveness.

Like Art Pepper, the great alto man, in his memoir, "Straight Life", she pulls no punches about the jazz life, the drug culture and the struggle to meld art and commerce.

Here is a woman who survived and performed for over 70 years and never lost her sense of humor.

Wonderful stories, great characters, wild times and sad times.

Even non-jazz fans should be intrigued.

But the most interesting theme for me is Anita O'Day's immersion in and dedication to the art of jazz singing.

Her thoughts on pitch, pronunciation, breath, volume, time, inspiration, commitment and reward are incisive.

PS 9/19/08 The new Anita O'Day documentary may still be running at Cinema Village in NYC and it is outstanding!

Sasha says

At 3 a.m. last night I finally read a last chapter, couldn't put it down before.

Yes, Anita O'Day's writing voice sounds very much like her singing self: ironic, witty, tough hip "swing chick" (her words) who didn't give a damn what others think. Her self-destructiveness very much echoes another famous artist (in rock music) Marianne Faithfull, in fact these two women have much more in common than you think. Both survivors, both eventually come back and lived to see reassessment of their careers. Her opinion about other jazz singers are sometimes strange ("Like me, Ella never had a great voice"?) - but think that she was commercially overshadowed by Fitzgerald. As much as Anita's "Verve" albums are beautiful and timeless this book is sometimes painful to read. I believe there is a general curiosity about somebody's dirty laundry, in this case it almost overshadows her art - at some points it reads like 50's detective story, with smoky jazz clubs, jazz musicians as drug addicts and cops always around to "find" (read: set up) drugs in dressing room. With all beautiful music she made, it's a pity that editor of the book finds more interesting to emphasize her drug addiction, since her arrests, sanatoriums, jails and courts get more space than anything else. I don't think this was her intention, probably publisher wanted scandalous story, but if you don't know her music, this book can make you think that Anita O'Day was a famous junkie who had a music as a hobby.

Bill Kerwin says

A great jazz singer tells it like it was.

Very good on Krupa and Kenton, the junkie years, and the subsequent revival of her career after the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival. The best part of the book, though, is an account of her experiences as an itinerant teenage marathon dancer singing for tips.

Miss O'Day is one tough broad--and it shows.

Annie Garvey says

What a mess! It's amazing that O'Day lived to be 87. She was a heroin addict and basically a bum. All her money went to her habit. In the end, I didn't like her; however, I admired her honesty. I still think that Billie Holliday was a better singer than O'Day.

Valerielynnbassett says

I love Anita O'Day's singing and saw an interesting documentary about her this summer that made me want to read her bio. This was a vacation read...it's compelling but sad as she describes her intense 15-year heroin addiction. Most interesting when she talks about the music and her work as a musician. Wish she talked more about that in this book.

Patrick says

I loved this book. Her authorial voice in the book is great--straightforward, no nonsense, and fully of dry humor. There is a noirish aspect to it too--she sounds like a 40s hipster throughout.

In a sense, her authorial voice echoes her singing voice.

It's always interesting to me when I read musician bios how little I know about their lives even if I know some of their work very well. I have few O'Day albums I've listened to over and over, so I feel this connection to the art, but I really knew only the vaguest details of her life.

She did have a rough upbringing and I had no idea she had been a marathon dancer during the depression. Also, did not know anything about her big-band years and this section is great. She pretty much remade the stereotype of the big band canary--wearing a band jacket and skirt instead of evening gowns. It wasn't just satorial, though--she did not sing like the other big band singers, she approached the songs like a jazz horn player. Reworked the melodies, rhythms, harmonies, never doing them the same way twice, to make them her own.

She writes pretty candidly and openly about her substance abuse problems but that is not the focus of the book. She loves music and this was one of the best musician bios i have read in terms of the artist talking about music. For example the Art Pepper autobio, *Straight Life*, was so disappointing to me, because he glosses over the music to spend most of the book talking about the big love of his life, the drugs. O'Day doesn't do this, she loved music and singing jazz and that comes through.

Like any good biographical work, in this case, autobiographical, the book captures a lot about the times the

subject lived in. Growing up in Chicago in the 20s, coming of age in the depression. The sections about getting illegal abortions as a young adult are pretty harrowing--all the more so because I was reading them against the background of a massive effort to turn back the clock to those times.

Can't believe how much she struggled as a musician throughout her professional life. Despite her brilliance as a singer, she spent most of her life struggling, one way or another, to make ends meet.

Anyways, this is a fine book, and I recommend it to anyone who is interested in O'Day.

Jim Mcclanahan says

I found myself thinking of the biography of Jaco Pastorius while reading this. The differences between the two were that Anita's was an auto-biography, so she got to choose what to include and exclude. Jaco, on the other hand in Jaco Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius the World's Greatest Bass Player is described in terms of a destroyed life. Although Anita O'Day portrays a "warts and all" image of herself, I felt that some of her descriptions of personal triumphs and tragedies were somewhat glib. As with many other artists of the era, (Ray Charles comes to mind) some of her best moments were ironically when she was at the low point in terms of sobriety. Still, her descriptions of events and relationships with musical greats was fascinating. I was constantly amazed at the amount of detail she seemed to be able to replicate, e.g., days, dates, times, etc. A great artist who lived a generally dissolute life, but somehow rose above it in the end.
