

PLAYING
CHANGES | *Jazz for the New Century*
Nate Chinen



Playing Changes: Jazz for the New Century

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Playing Changes: Jazz for the New Century Nate Chinen

One of jazz's leading critics gives us an invigorating, richly detailed portrait of the artists and events that have shaped the music of our time. Grounded in authority and brimming with style, *Playing Changes* is the first book to take the measure of this exhilarating moment: it is a compelling argument for the resiliency of the art form and a rejoinder to any claims about its calcification or demise.

"Playing changes," in jazz parlance, has long referred to an improviser's resourceful path through a chord progression. *Playing Changes* boldly expands on the idea, highlighting a host of significant changes—ideological, technological, theoretical, and practical—that jazz musicians have learned to navigate since the turn of the century. Nate Chinen, who has chronicled this evolution firsthand throughout his journalistic career, vividly sets the backdrop, charting the origins of jazz historicism and the rise of an institutional framework for the music. He traces the influence of commercialized jazz education and reflects on the implications of a globalized jazz ecology. He unpacks the synergies between jazz and postmillennial hip-hop and R&B, illuminating an emergent rhythm signature for the music. And he shows how a new generation of shape-shifting elders, including Wayne Shorter and Henry Threadgill, have moved the aesthetic center of the music.

Woven throughout the book is a vibrant cast of characters—from the saxophonists Steve Coleman and Kamasi Washington to the pianists Jason Moran and Vijay Iyer to the bassist and singer Esperanza Spalding—who have exerted an important influence on the scene. This is an adaptive new music for a complex new reality, and *Playing Changes* is the definitive guide.

Playing Changes: Jazz for the New Century Details

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From Reader Review Playing Changes: Jazz for the New Century for online ebook

Scott Schneider says

Amazing review of the past 30 years of jazz. Many of the rising stars he cites I am familiar with but there were many I haven't heard of. I wish the book had been accompanied with a CD of music to listen to while reading the book. Chinen shows that jazz is alive and well with dozens of new talents taking jazz in many new directions.

Tim Niland says

Nate Chinen is one of the most well known jazz jazz critics of the modern era, writing for the New York Times, NPR and more. In this book, he examines the jazz scene in the post millennium time period, focusing on the young musicians and issues that are notable in today's music. It's a breathless rush through some of the major themes that have become prevalent as of late, such as the neo-conservatism presented by Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra vs. the DIY aesthetic of John Zorn's performance space The Stone and the Vision Festival of Patricia Nicholson and William Parker. This is demonstrated by analyzing the conflicting desire to hold on to traditional swing and blues against the increasing influence of hip-hop and complex new musical forms represented by Kamasi Washington and Mary Halvorson respectively. To Chinen's credit, he doesn't see these approaches as completely contradictory, believing that there is significant overlap that hedges against any reductive conclusion. The book draws both from the voluminous writing he has done in the past along with new ideas, and he presents himself as a master of the biographical sketch, juggling character sketches, musical analysis and interviews with colleagues to present a well rounded look into individual musicians. His examination of the position of women in jazz is particularly illuminating, beginning with Cecile McLorin Salvant's subtle tweaking of the role of the modern jazz vocalist and approach to standards and repertoire and Esperanza Spalding's journey from a prodigy through to massive success and awards and the drive to stay at the public eye either through webcasts or playing against type in her own bands or with others, from post bop with Joe Lovano through to her own unclassifiable Emily D + Evolution project. The profile of Mary Halvorson is particularly illuminating, as she speaks candidly about being a woman in predominantly male led groups, and her triumph has an original and an iconoclast is very interesting. Other profiles of note include a lengthy look at the music of Jason Moran and his voyage from Houston to becoming a modern mainstream phenom in the first decade of the millennium to someone who became interested in larger scale thematic and multimedia presentations, breaking away from Blue Note Records to self-releaeese music on his own terms. One of the missed opportunities in this book was a potential discussion of music distribution in the modern era, particularly the Bandcamp vs. Spotify approaches, though the issue has been discussed at length elsewhere. Whether examining the overarching themes that confront the music in the modern age, or getting down to the granular level by interviewing musicians and examining their output, Chinen is engaging and thought-provoking throughout, giving the reader the tools and the encouragement to check out the music for themselves, balancing boosterism with criticism in a fine and thoughtful manner.

Ted Burke says

A book I'm currently reading, "Playing Changes" by Nate Chinen, is a fascinating argument that we are currently in an age of amazing new jazz artists and an equal amount of amazing innovation and new ways for jazz composers and soloists to further this resilient art of musical improvisation. The premise is not one I'd bicker with--ours is a time when the "jazz is dead" club needs to just be silent for a very long time and listen to the creativity that abounds. But, as the review points out, author Chinen, a critic with a forward-thinking preference for new and temperamentally sounds, writes in a such a way that he makes you think of the guy who must have been the least interesting student in a seminar on post-modernism. He does not, as the reviewer suggests, at times sound like Derrida; rather, he seems more like a person who thinks he sounds like Derrida. Which is a shame, because although Chinen writes about important artists and at times makes crucial distinctions in what is happening in the ever-evolving jazz timeline, it seems that the premise of the book is that the music exists only to be co-opted and made to dance between inscrutable phrases and descriptions that don't really intrigue a reader to actually go out and purchase some of this fine new music. Tellingly, Nate Chinen chides the older critical establishment, those who would have jazz become a formalized canon, set in place, with boundaries and inflexible boundaries, yet he seems to be working to construct his own fiefdom of critical imperative. Meet the new boss... In any case, all this begs the question to be asked, which is why can't there be a working idea of jazz that doesn't require anyone going to war against other schools of thoughts on the music, or specific ways of playing. A jazz fan can enjoy both and not be betraying whatever "true spirit" of jazz the critical camps think. Seriously, one occasionally feels that some critics, whether Leonard Feather, Amiri Baraka or Nate Chinen, despite his protest to the contrary, wish they could be in the studio, instructing the musicians in what their note selections and points of creating tension and release should be.

Dave Purcell says

Excellent dive into the storylines and developments of modern jazz. Lots of great recommendations included.

K says

The first half of this book is incredibly strong with tons of observations that cut through the fray. I found the chapter on jazz education to be puzzling and didn't really get as clear a sense of the point as, say, the chapters on jazz heroism and the uptown/downtown divide. The second half of the book is less clearly conceived as the first half. The features on Jason Moran and Esperanza Spaulding were welcome, but I was pretty irritated that Chinen didn't wade into the massive debates that have bubbled to the surface in the wake of Robert Glasper's comments about women in jazz. Additionally, the last chapter on global fusions was fascinating, but it also felt unfinished in comparison to the rigor of the rest of the book. Chinen tries to engage with some recent jazz scholarship here, especially Stuart Nicholson and some of the recent books on the Routledge Transatlantic Jazz series, but I mostly mourned the absence of scholarly and critical voices from Latin America. In contrast to the earlier chapters in this book, the second half of the book seems to be written exclusively for jazz insiders. That's a shame. I am a huge fan, and I tired of the constant naming of musicians and the assumption that the reader would be fluent in jazz history. It's a shame because I think the overall argument of the book is very strong.

As an aside, some of the other reviews on this website complain about Chinen's critical tone. I really like it and see it as more celebratory. It's a deep dive into sonorous description rather than merely celebratory.

