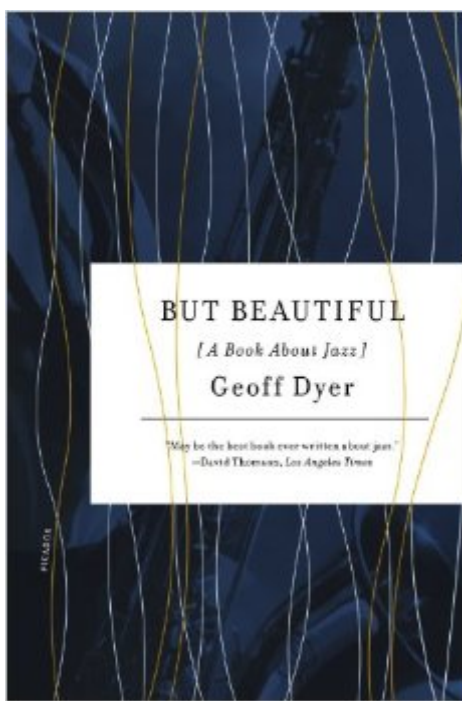


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# But Beautiful: A Book About Jazz



## Synopsis

"May be the best book ever written about jazz." •David Thomson, Los Angeles Times  
In eight poetically charged vignettes, Geoff Dyer skillfully evokes the music and the men who shaped modern jazz. Drawing on photos, anecdotes, and, most important, the way he hears the music, Dyer imaginatively reconstructs scenes from the embattled lives of some of the greats: Lester Young fading away in a hotel room; Charles Mingus storming down the streets of New York on a too-small bicycle; Thelonious Monk creating his own private language on the piano. However, music is the driving force of *But Beautiful*, and wildly metaphoric prose that mirrors the quirks, eccentricity, and brilliance of each musician's style.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Picture this: "Onstage at Birdland, eyes shut, one arm hanging at his side....trumpet raised to his lips like a brandy bottle--not playing the horn but swigging from it, sipping it." Geoff Dyer's employs his exquisite imagery as a starting point for his "imaginative criticism" of the celebrated and tragic lives of several iconic jazz musicians (including figures such as Chet Baker, Lester Young, Thelonious Monk, Ben Webster, Charles Mingus, and Bud Powell). While photographs are the inspiration, Dyer's writing is so precise and sensual that he need only describe the photographs (the book has only one small photo). And this is just right for a book about music, his writing is so lyrical that we almost hear the sounds while reading. (In fact, the least effective aspect of the book is the Duke Ellington "road trip" that introduces each chapter, perhaps because the narrative is not connected to any particular Ellington sound.) Many of the scenes and dialogue (especially the inner dialogue) are

necessarily fictions, "assume that what's here has been invented or altered rather than quoted." But Dyer's explains that while his version may veer from the truth, "it keeps faith with the improvisational prerogatives of the form." He mixes truth and fiction into portraits that illuminate what strictly factual history cannot always convey. (Think of Robert Graves' in his WWI memoir/fiction "Goodbye to All That."). Dyer explains that while a photo depicts only a "split second," its "felt duration" may include the unseen moments before and after that split second.

This work, along with James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues," is as good as any I've read about the jazz life, its creators and innovators, and the high cost of such terrible beauty. I had the advantage of being present while Lester was lost on stage in an alcoholic stupor; Monk was dancing around the piano, knocking over cymbals, rather than playing the instrument; Chet Baker, unable to stand, was expending his last breaths on "The Thrill Is Gone"; and Duke was waiting for Harry Carney to swing by with the car to chauffeur him through the wintry night from Kenosha, Wisconsin to Kansas City. But how a young writer like Dyer managed to capture these moments before his time, freezing them unforgettably in a literary living moment, I can't imagine. Dyer knows that the foremost responsibility of a music critic is not to critique but to verbalize his non-verbal subject, bringing it to life for the reader. He does so admirably, creating believable, recognizable, fascinating portraits in unlabored, unpretentious prose. His portraits of the artist ring completely true to the ears of this fellow observer--penetrating glimpses of the creative child trapped in a man's body now reduced to fighting a losing battle against physical and mental entropy. Yet his faith in the living tradition of jazz is refreshing, as is his characterization of the jazz musician's struggle as a valiant contest with the precursor, not unlike that of the strong poet's. Though there's an elegaic tone throughout the book, it's never ponderous or depressing. In fact, its human portraits are more likely to interest newcomers than the many text books that catalog styles and names. This is not to say the book is without shortcomings. The author is much better at capturing the musicians for us than their music.

Geoff Dyer's *But Beautiful: A Book about Jazz* is much more than an extended critical essay on a still-evolving, vital musical genre and a great deal more than fictional portrayals of Jazz legends. Here, Dyer focuses his considerable talents on creating a kind of Jazz-in-print, seeking to emulate the frenzied riffing, explosive spontaneity and creative interplay, which has given Jazz music so much more vitality than many other genres' created in the 20th century. Without question, one would have to agree that he has succeeded, totally to the readers' enrichment. *But Beautiful* hits the

reader on several levels; we are taken on a series of journeys into the lives, thoughts, conversations and seminal events of eight Jazz musicians. Between each chapter is inserted a fictional, road-tripping almost ghostly presence of Duke Ellington, a father figure of modern Jazz who may well have known, recorded and very likely influenced all eight men whom Dyer chose to write/riff about. What's real about the eight musicians are the bare-bones facts known to many Jazz fans; Lester Young court-martialed by the Army because of an inability to cope with a racist Drill Sergeant, Chet Baker's teeth knocked out by an angry drug dealer in a seedy, San Francisco diner, Art Pepper sentenced to five years in prison on a Heroin possession conviction and so on. What's possible, and perhaps no less real to the reader are the details of their lives, their anguish and the self-destructive passions which attend the day to day living of so many creative people. Dyer draws these details in part through listening to the music and inspiration gained by looking at photographs of some of the musicians. 'Not as they were but as they appear to me....

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