

***Listening For Henry Crowder: A Monograph on His Almost Lost Music, with CD featuring a recording by Henry Crowder of a blues by Nancy Cunard and a new recording of his setting to a poem by Samuel Beckett sung by Allan Harris.*** By Anthony Barnett. Lewes, East Sussex: Allardyce Book, 2007. 128 pp. + CD. \$89.50 paper.

Post-breakup bitterness has poisoned more than a few memoirs, ultimately diserving the author more than the target, and it's hard to think of a clearer example than Henry Crowder's *As Wonderful As All That?*, co-written with journalist Henry Speck shortly after Crowder's breakup with Nancy Cunard. Although not published until 1987, it appeared right at the moment that modernist women were at last beginning to get their academic due (Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*, for instance, was published the previous year). In this context, Crowder's reflections on his former lover of seven years have done little to encourage further attention. For many contemporary scholars Cunard's greatest achievement was producing, editing, and publishing her monumental anthology, *Negro*, dedicated "To Henry Crowder, my first Negro friend." That generosity is absent from Crowder's own memoir, its place taken by still-fresh regret and anger. Crowder acknowledged the "tremendous odds" (118) that Cunard faced in putting together the book, but judged that the greatest obstacle of all was her own ignorance. Ouch. Ignorant as she might have been of African-American culture, Cunard was at the least eager to learn and ready to love—and the evidence of Anthony Barnett's meticulously researched monograph suggests that Crowder would rarely if ever again know such attention from the white world. Years later, after Crowder's death, Cunard wrote to her American (and academic) friend Charles Burkhardt that "Henry made me" (Ford 327). This comment is no small thing. Cunard biographers like Lois Gordon have interpreted it to mean that Crowder supplied Cunard with a mission-for-life. Barnett himself, however, is a careful, even cautious scholar not given to speculation, and his focus is on the impact of that relationship on Crowder.

For Crowder, Cunard's publication of *Henry-Music* in 1930 was certainly the fulfillment of a dream. Such a publication of compositions, with lyrics by prominent poets, seemed to portend respect and even a career. But, once over, the widespread publicity of the Cunard-Crowder relationship meant that on his return to Washington Crowder was unable to get gigs. None of Washington's society hosts or hostesses was willing to employ him. Crowder headed back to Europe, where he continued playing clubs until arrested by the Nazis in April, 1942. The story of his attempted escape and eventual arrest, as Barnett tells it, is captivating. Waiting to board a train in Abbeville, France, "on what was supposed to be the last train to as yet unoccupied Paris, [Crowder] went for a drink in a nearby café. During the few minutes of his absence, German planes bombed and strafed the train and station, killing most of the passengers." Crowder then made his way "on foot through the German lines, frequently stopped and questioned, to Brussels" (36), and then some fifteen months later (shortly before the Normandy invasion) was imprisoned in Germany, in Tittmoning Castle. He spent the next two years there until being released in a prisoner-of-war exchange. Back in Washington he reunited with his once-estranged wife,

but he never thereafter attempted to relaunch his career as a jazz musician. The Nazis didn't kill the man, but they seem to have killed the artist.

It is on Crowder the artist that *Listening For Henry Crowder* focuses. At the very least this meticulously researched study will help later generations see the man in something more like his own terms. But, in recovering Crowder's "almost lost music," Barnett gives a second life to the musician, restoring the artist to him who previously had been inscribed as little more than a lively episode in Cunard's colorful life and career. Barnett's title is itself worth pausing over, as it reminds us that the few recordings Crowder was able to make have hitherto been known only to a handful of zealous record collectors. Before we could listen to *Crowder* some serious detective work was necessary to find the audio documents of his music.

This book does much to restore Crowder's voice, a voice that between the late twenties and early thirties was much in evidence. And what of that evidence survives is collected here. The CD that accompanies this monograph contains every recording that we know Crowder to have made, including player-piano rolls. In addition, it includes contemporaneous sides cut by ensembles with which Crowder performed, near the time he played with them, but on which for one reason or another he didn't play. The final four tracks on the CD feature orchestras with which Crowder worked but did not record, close to the time that he was with them. Barnett's idea is to help us reconstruct the musical milieu within which Crowder did his best work. The piano rolls of 1926 reveal a talented musician well-versed in ragtime and stride. There's little evidence of the blues in this work—which marks Crowder's east-coast orientation in general, and his Washington style in particular (think of Duke Ellington's earliest sides, recorded about the same time). The next group of recordings were made in Chicago (1927) and New York (1928) with Eddie South And His Alabamians; South was a jazz violinist who did well in the capitals of Europe, and it was in the company of South's orchestra that Crowder first made his fateful way to Europe.

Scholars interested in Cunard, however, will find the performances of *Henry-Music* that Barnett produced for this study especially compelling. Allan Harris, one of the best jazz vocalists of our own moment, working with pianist Yan Pevzner, performs the pieces that Crowder wrote for *Henry-Music*. Imagine short jazz pieces with lyrics by Samuel Beckett ("From The Only Poet To A Shining Whore"), Cunard herself ("Equatorial Way" and "Boeuf sur le Toit"), or Richard Aldington ("Madrigal"), among others. Here is a genuinely rich encounter between modernist writing and modernist music—jazz.

The book itself, of course, also represents painstaking detective work. In fact, the second half comprises the primary documents from which Barnett draws his own modest conclusions: contemporaneous reviews of Crowder's music; excerpts from memoirs by Eddie South, Leonard Feather,

and Norman MacLeod; journalistic pieces from Crowder himself published in the black press; news coverage of Crowder's wartime repatriation. Finally, the book closes with statements from the engineers who transcribed Crowder's piano rolls to CD; an explanation from Allan Harris about his object in performing *Henry-Music*; and a rollography and discography of Crowder's music.

Barnett is himself an extraordinary character, a jazz musician as well as a published poet who has spent forty years working as an independent scholar. Demonstrating an affinity for the forgotten, he usually focuses on the almost-vanished world of jazz violin, and the otherwise unremarked transition from a Victorian world in which most bourgeois homes could produce at least one violinist. In fact, I imagine that it was Crowder's work with Eddie South that first brought him to Barnett's attention. Happy meeting, that, because I can't think of anyone else who would have been willing or able to reconstruct the shattered traces of Crowder's life and career. All told, this study is as impressive as it is serious. More than that, it's a book that anyone interested in Cunard and race needs to read.

#### **Works Cited**

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