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American Singers: Twenty-seven Portraits in Song

Whitney Balliett

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When Whitney Balliett's *American Musicians* appeared in the Fall of 1986, the acclaim it received was universal. Leonard Feather, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, said "no other writer now living can write with comparable grace and equal enthusiasm about everyone from Jack Teagarden and Art Tatum to Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman." And Bruce Cook in *The New Leader* called the book "the quintessential Whitney Balliett, the cream of the cream, a collection that leaves no doubt about his strength."

That book gathered together all of Balliett's profiles of jazz instrumentalists. Here, in the revised edition of *American Singers*, Balliett has added thirteen new biographical profiles to double the size of the book and provide the perfect complement to *American Musicians*. It now contains all the profiles on singers that Balliett has written for *The New Yorker*. Alongside original chapters on such great vocalists as Ray Charles, Tony Bennett, Joe Turner and Alberta Hunter, Balliett has added fresh portraits of Mel Torme, Julius La Rosa, George Shearing, and Peggy Lee. To his study of four masters of the cabaret (Hugh Shannon, Mabel Mercer, Bobby Short, and Blossom Dearie) he has joined a fifth, Julie Wilson. There are new chapters on singer-pianists Cleo Brown and Nellie Lutcher, as well as on Carol Sloane, Betty Carter, and David Frishberg. Perhaps most notable is his extended profile of Alec Wilder, one of America's most lyrical and moving songwriters and composers.

In the three decades that he has written for *The New Yorker*, Whitney Balliett has earned the reputation as America's foremost jazz critic. The late Philip Larkin described him as a "writer who brings jazz journalism to the verge of poetry," and Gene Lees called him "one of the most graceful essayists in the English language on any subject." He has an unsurpassed ability to convey in words the sound of a singer's voice, and he makes readers feel, as one observer put it, that they are "sitting with Balliett and his subject and listening in."

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