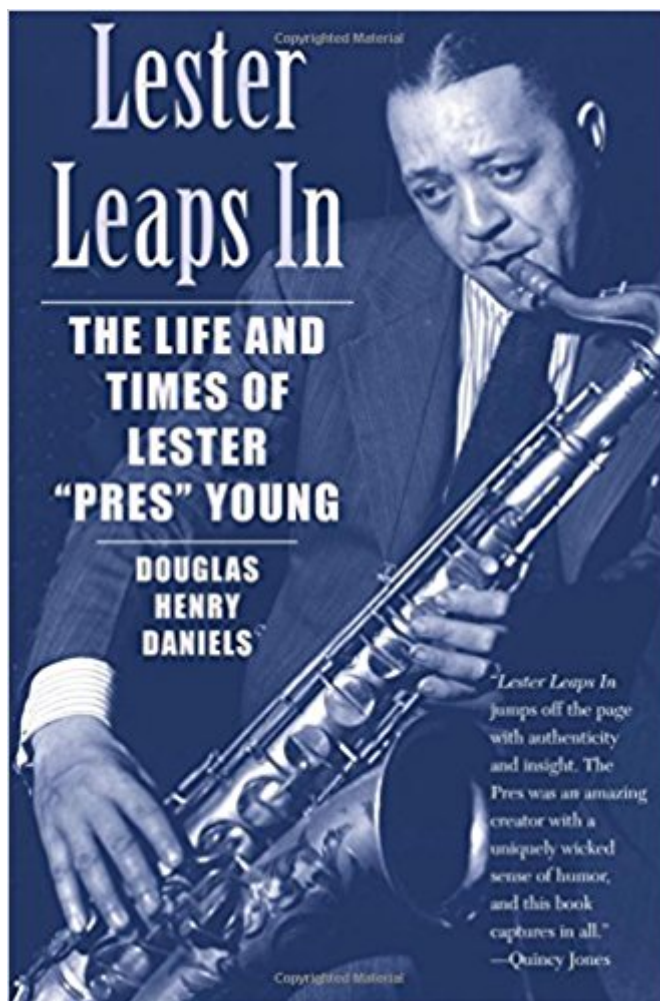


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# Lester Leaps In: The Life And Times Of Lester Pres Young



## Synopsis

He was jazz's first hipster. He performed in sunglasses and coined and popularized phrases like "that's cool" and "you dig?" He always wore a suit and his trademark porkpie hat. He influenced everyone from B. B. King to Stan Getz to Allen Ginsberg, creating a lyrical style of playing that forever changed the sound of the tenor saxophone. In this groundbreaking biography of Lester Young (1909-1959), historian Douglas Daniels brings to life the man and his world, and corrects a number of misconceptions. Even though others have identified Young as a Kansas City musician, Daniels traces his roots to the blues of Louisiana and his early years traveling with his father's band and the legendary Oklahoma City Blue Devils. Later we see the jazz culture of New York in the early 1940s, when Young was launched to national and international fame with the Count Basie Orchestra and began to accompany his close friend Billie Holiday. After a year spent in an Army prison on a conviction for marijuana use, Young made changes in his music but never lost his sensitivity or soul. The first ever to gain access to Young's family and many musicians who performed with him, Daniels reconstructs the world in which Young lived and played: the racism that he and other black musicians faced, the feeling of home and family that they created together on the road, and what his music meant to black audiences. Young emerges as a kind friend, a loving parent, and a gentle and sensitive man who had, in the words of Reginald Scott, "the saddest eyes I ever saw

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Saxophonist Young dodged most everyone and made a sport of eluding interviewers and outsiders with his brand of elliptical jazz slang (one club owner cranked up a fan after Young said, "You're smotherin' me"). As a writer for *Jet* wrote just after Young's death in 1959: "No one really knew the true Lester." This makes Daniels's book all the more impressive. By interviewing for the first time many of Young's relatives, friends and band mates, while also examining and challenging virtually everything written about the man, Daniels (*Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco*) adds a layer of understanding to an enigmatic figure. Throughout, the author, a professor of black studies and history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, offers a balanced portrait of a shy, sensitive man whose relaxed onstage persona masked an uneasy loner. The first two-thirds of the book focuses on Young's rise, beginning with his strict musical training and upbringing in his father's traveling minstrel show to his mythic duel against heavyweight Coleman Hawkins in a Kansas City nightclub and landing the lead tenor spot in Count Basie's Orchestra. The remainder is dedicated to Young's life post-1945, the year in which he was dishonorably discharged from the army for marijuana possession. While many critics nail this as the turning point in Young's career, Daniels encourages the reader to revisit the later works, which kept changing and drawing more fans until his death, at age 49, from drinking. This is a wonderful writing of his life. (Feb.) Forecast: Twenty years in the making, this is the most thorough and penetrating book on the President of the Tenor Saxophone to date. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This biography of one of jazz's major innovators and iconoclasts places Young's music in the context of African American culture. While both Lewis Porter's *Lester Young* (o.p.) and Frank Buchman-Moller's *You Just Fight for Your Life* (1990) offer fine overviews of the tenor saxophonist's life, Daniels (history and black studies, Univ. of California, Santa Barbara) delves deeply into the mores and culture surrounding his subject as a child in Louisiana and then his stretch playing for his father's musical entourage. He then attacks the thorny issues of Young's desire to provide for his family while contending with strong urges to travel and play. Young's contradictory actions reveal a sensitive observer of life bedeviled by various personal and social problems, including chronic alcoholism and a hypersensitivity to racism. Daniels also shows that Young's music didn't deteriorate after his disastrous World War II army experiences but rather continued in fresh, invigorating ways. Although the author sometimes makes claims about Young's thoughts and feelings with little supporting evidence, this is nonetheless a worthwhile purchase for music,

academic, and large public libraries. William G. Kenz, Minnesota State Univ., Moorhead Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Great book

Wonderful music .

First of all, I agree with some other commentator in that half of the book is devoted to social, political, and historical issues which, while obviously interesting to mention, are not the main issue of the book. Thus, the book results boring if what you really wanted was an insightful biography of Lester. This is not by any means. As someone else poited, the info the author got about Prez's family is valuable, but also kind of encyclopedic and I would have preferred to look to much of it on footnotes. Sometimes, details are unnecessary. On the other hand, when we get into the important issued of Lester's life, the author lacks all sort of detail. The last 20 years of his life pass in the book without you even noticing them. It's true the author conducted lots of interviews with very interesting people in Lester's life, such as his sidemen. But at the same time, those interviews are not properly reflected on the book. Daniels rarely quotes more than a textual line from his interviews (or in fact, from any other source, including Lester's own interviews), and instead prefers to paraphrase all the time. With that you loose all sense of the actual interview, and to tell the truth, the quotes often seem to me completely unimportant. More than half of them are devoted to musicians and relatives or friends telling how much they loved and admired Lester. I don't doubt the sincerity of that love, but it hardly gives you any insight on the main character of the book. Maybe the interviews in themselves were too short or superficial. Maybe Daniels never quotes the interesting parts. On the other hand, the book doesn't read as a biography. It only works (but it's terribly boring nevertheless) if you, like me, already know a lot about Lester, having listened to all of his recordings and read other books. Otherwise, you'll feel lost, for Daniels comes and goes in time without a precise order; now he is in 1946, now in 1958, then back to 1952, then "in the 1050s". That makes it very hard to follow a choronology of facts. Also, he chooses to write in essay-like chapters, which not necessarily reflect a proper time period other than in its title. And doing so, Daniels repeats himself plenty of times. Also, Daniels doesn't seem to really know Lester's music, or much less love it. All of his comentaries are "academic", cold, and most of the times when musical matters are on the table, he just quotes different critics here and there. But there's not a true analysis on his music, and you

don't get an idea of what the author thinks. Not that I care, by the way, but with more than 500 pages (more than 100 of unsustantial footnotes!!!!!!) you come to expect that opinion. As said before, Daniels quotes infinite sources, but never quotes more than a line (perhaps to avoid paying any right or being sued, but so much paraphrasing makes a hard reading and makes it impossible for you to really judge what the original writer or interviewed really said). This is more important when considering the absense in the book's 500 pages of Lester Young's own voice. He didn't concede many interviews, but the ones he did give, while are probably al mentioned, are always quoted in the aforementioned and meaningless way. In 500 pages, you expect at least to have a couple of complete interviews at the end. Or at least substantial quotes. In the chapter referring to his military trial, the interrogatory is mentioned countless times, but always paraphrased, and never properly quoted. Apart from making the reading boring, this would have obviously needed to be generously quotes and then properly analyzed. What's the use of getting the author's superficial (always superficial) analysis of a rare document we cannot previsouly read at least in part??? Also, the author doesn't add anything on sustantial matters, such as Lester's relations with Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, Charlie Christian... And on the other hand, he mentions plenty of times Lester's "imitators", but without naming names. He even writes about one such "imitator" working in Paris at the same time Lester was and getting more money than him. What's the use of not mentioning who the musician was after so many decades? And what does the word "imitator" really mean? Would you apply that term to Sonny Stitt or Lee Konitz when speaking about Bird? Without admitting their obvious inspiration, I would not speak of them as such, and I can enjoy their playing without admitting their Bird-influenced playing. Is Daniels refering to Stan Getz? To what point can someone be disqualified just as "imitator"? Conclusion: Not a good book, beyond the nice cover, the lenght, and the appearances. Badly written, and not informative enough on the title subject. The opposit of what you get in Robin Kelley's wonderful "Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original", which is to me a model of what a jazzman's biography should be.

Douglas Daniels should be congratulated for digging deep in researching Lester Young's early ways with his father. The Minneapolis days are also explored, as well as the importance of group comradeship in the Kansas City Seven. Interviews with sidemen dispel the myth of a decline after WW II, and I would have appreciated more quotes from these interviews. Some common themes throughout the book are the impact of race in the south and in touring and booking policies. Pres's integrity, independence, and perhaps stoicism is highlighted. The importance of Lester to swing, bebop, cool, and the "beat-nicks" is obvious in the well-written last "Legacy" chapter. Throughout

the book one gets the historical feel of the history of Jazz from Minstrel to King Oliver to Basie to Jazz at the Philharmonic. There are weaknesses in the book. Young left few written letters and had few interviews, but there are many cases where Daniels infers inner thoughts from external surroundings.... for example "Oliver was a father figure to Young". Daniels' style is academic, and the dryness doesn't always work well for a true individual like Pres. The narrative would have benefited from more antidotes and quotes from Lester, particularly with respect to his relation with Billy Holiday. More emphasis on Lester's musical style and important recordings would have been expected, and a complete discography with sidemen, would have been more beneficial than the over 100 pages of notes.

In a refreshing approach, Daniels treats Lester Young's story in the context of Black Studies. Daniels is not a musician, and his book, while very good, could only have been improved by editorial oversight by a musician or musician/scholars like Lewis Porter or Loren Schoenberg. Quibbles aren't important. What is important is how Daniels's book is based on twenty years of unique interviews he did with Young's relations and fellow musicians. He thinks that Young's community has had its ups and downs with the world of white jazz criticism, and in this Daniels can only be right. Daniels supplies amazing information about how the white-run publications *DownBeat* and *Metronome* ripped Young to shreds for the last fifteen years of his life while Young was revered as a cultural hero in contemporary black press like the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Amsterdam News*. (Around the same time George T. Simon -- Glenn Miller's drummer and biographer -- reviewed a Young performance in *Melody Maker* saying that Lester Young couldn't play on the changes of the simple standard "A Foggy Day," *Ebony* published an pictorial on Young called, "How to Make a Porkpie Hat.") Even today, when I talk to older black musicians, they give Young an iconic, heroic status that is as related to what he represented as to what he played. Young is the perfect subject for a Black Studies approach. At any rate, the entry of black writers into jazz should be celebrated, whether they are musicians or not. They are a much-needed voice in the choir. I'm appalled at the defamatory one and two star reviews on here on . (They have prompted this, my first review.) Daniels is certainly not "militant" or "neo-conservative." He's not racist, either, being appropriately careful to document Young's lifelong love of Bix Beiderbecke, Frankie Trumbauer, and Jimmy Dorsey. (A love that has been the sorest sticking point to black-centric musicians and critics in jazz history!) Daniels talks to white sidemen like Barney Kessel too. The story of Young's upbringing and family is told nowhere else in such detail than in *Lester Leaps In*. I don't think a white jazz critic would have downplayed this information if they could have gotten it, but that's the point: only

Daniels could have gotten it. This is the most recent major book on Lester Young, and future writers will be indebted to Daniels for sharing some of this inside material.

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