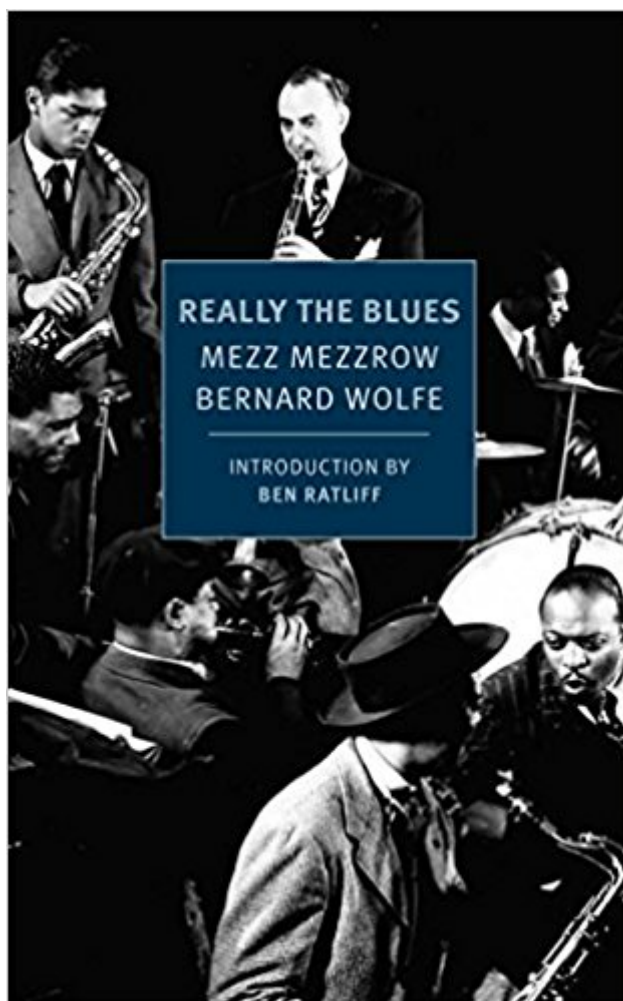


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Really The Blues (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

Mezz Mezzrow was a boy from Chicago who learned to play the sax in reform school and pursued a life in music and a life of crime. He moved from Chicago to New Orleans to New York, working in brothels and bars, bootlegging, dealing drugs, getting hooked, doing time, producing records, and playing with the greats, among them Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, and Fats Waller. Really the Blues, the jive-talking memoir that Mezzrow wrote at the insistence of, and with the help of, the novelist Bernard Wolfe, is the story of an unusual and unusually American life, and a portrait of a man who moved freely across racial boundaries when few could or did, the odyssey of an individualist . . . the saga of a guy who wanted to make friends in a jungle where everyone was too busy making money. •

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Customer Reviews

Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow was a white jewish kid who was born in Chicago in 1899. In his late teens he discovered the jazz music that was being played around the south side of Chicago in those days. "Mezz" fell in love with the sound of early jazz and with the excitement of the music scene. Chicago was a jazz center then, and Mezzrow heard many of the great pioneers of the music including Freddie Keppard, Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong and many others. Soon he bought a clarinet and began trying to play like his heroes. The club owners who employed Mezzrow were prohibition era gangsters including Al Capone. The gangsters were interesting louts. Capone once wanted

Mezzrow to fire a girl singer who was developing a romantic relationship with Capone's younger brother. Capone said, "she can't sing anyway." Mezzrow was so upset that he told Capone, "why, you couldn't even tell good whisky if you smelled it and that's your racket, so how do you figure to tell me about music." (sic) Feisty! Mezzrow wrote this book in 1946, and he uses 20's era slang to tell his story. This is as groovie as a 10 cent movie, jack. It's also fun. Mezzrow's maniacal enthusiasm for early jazz is endearing. Not many people who were actually present at the time considered jazz music to be important enough to write books about. Part of Mezzrow's purpose is to convince the reader that jazz music is important. One of the earlier reviewers compares Mezzrow's book unfavorably to Louis Armstrong's autobiography, Satchmo. Armstrong's book is good, but Mezzrow's book is more honest than Armstrong's. Armstrong was born into dire poverty. His mother may have been a prostitute, and he was placed in an orphanage at an early age. His book cleans up the criminals and murders in his story so that they are merely "colorful characters", and he leaves out as much unpleasantness as possible. Mezzrow tells more of the whole story. He candidly discusses his drug experiences, and his jail sentences as well as his happier times. An added bonus to this book is that Mezzrow leaves out all that boring background information that plagues other books, like who his grand parents were and what his childhood was like. Mezzrow's book starts right off with his discovery of music in Pontiac reform school. If you like this book, or Louis Armstrong's book, another good book by an early jazz musician is Jelly Roll Morton's book, Mr. Jelly Roll.

Often considered a highly unreliable autobiography, 'Really the Blues' is really an insight into the personality of Mezz Mezzrow rather than a factual retelling of his life events. Milton 'Mezz' Mesirov was a Jewish-American jazz clarinetist born in 1899 in Chicago. Mezz quickly showed a penchant for jazz music, like his mentor Louis Armstrong, for whom he briefly may have served as manager. Although Milton "Mezz" Mesirov is generally remembered as one of the best jazz musicians, Mesirov was in-fact a very technically skilled clarinetist and quite knowledgeable about the workings of the jazz music industry. Milton's life was often a product of the demands of the music industry which he found himself. His personality could best be viewed as a reflection of the rough-and-tumble environment of mob-controlled, Prohibition-era Chicago. Due to the uncertainty of the circumstances abound, Mezz was a fearless rebel-rouser. He took risks, such as smuggling some twenty joints into a New York night club. He was stopped and caught by the police, a violation for which he was arrested and taken to jail. When he arrived, Mezzrow successfully persuaded the officials to let him stay in a black section of the segregated prison by convincing them that he was African American. In addition to music, race-relations emerges as a theme in the autobiography.

Mezz married a black woman, played music like a black person, and was more interested in black culture than in white culture. Mezz also dealt marijuana in spades. His marijuana dealing perhaps earned him higher distinction than his jazz playing. In the lingo of the time, "Mezz" became slang for marijuana. Milton also gained the nickname "Muggles King," at the time "muggles" being a slang word for marijuana. The writing style featured by Mezz and Bernard Wolfe makes 'Really the Blues' a fast-paced and entertaining read. Mezz's narrative style in 'Really the Blues' is self-assuring, reading as if Mezz were in the room and actively trying to engage the reader. Consequently, the insight that the reader gets into Mesirov's psyche comes not just from the stories, but in large part from the narrative style itself. Mesirov is revealed to the reader through his contemporary grammar, liberal syntax, and the nonchalant method by which he organizes his book. Reading 'Really the Blues' is an experience unto itself. Mezz takes the reader on a ride through another time, an era defined largely by the times. The reader is also given an entertaining educational look at the life of an important, if somewhat marginalized early jazz musician, Milton "Mezz" Mesirov.

I was just lucky enough to be given a batch of discarded books on music because I teach a course in music appreciation. I thumbed thru the box and stumbled across Really the Blues, printed 1946, first edition, great condition. What started out as a simply read turned into an obsession and I read the entire book in two settings. It is a journey that few people have ever taken and even fewer have written about. The lingo alone is worth the price of the book. For those who have ever wondered what the smell of jazz was like in the 20s-30s and 40s, read this book. It rips at your sense of justice, morality, and involvement in the human race. Milton Mezzrow gets my vote for one of the top spots in American music history as well as one of the top spots among those who have given back to the world much more than they ever took. The book smolders with intensity and describes a journey into one's self that takes the reader from the recording studios of Harlem, across the world of music, into the flophouses and whorehouses that featured jazz in the early years, on thru jails, prisons, and work gangs. The life and times of Milton Mezzrow should under no circumstances be left out of the history of jazz. I found it satisfying to hear that in slang Mezz has come to mean the best as this is surely the best story that I have read in so long that it defies comparison to anything that I can remember. If you do not read another book for the remainder of the year, when this one is available, grab it, a slightly warm beer and find a very comfortable spot to enter a world that reads like science fiction and yet is indeed music fact. Good reading and enjoy the beer too.

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