



## Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings (Modern Library Classics)

By *Ralph Ellison*

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Before Ralph Ellison became one of America's greatest writers, he was a musician and a student of jazz, writing widely on his favorite music for more than fifty years. Now, jazz authority Robert O'Meally has collected the very best of Ellison's inspired, exuberant jazz writings in this unique anthology.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Many people don't realize that novelist Ralph Ellison, best-known as the author of *Invisible Man*, was first an accomplished trumpeter and a student of musical composition, especially jazz. In *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, literature and jazz scholar Robert O'Meally, founder and director of the Center for Jazz Studies, has collected the best of this oeuvre in a volume that includes profiles of jazz greats like Charlie Parker, meditations on jazz classics, music-related selections from Ellison's fiction and a foreword by Wynton Marsalis. No Ellison fan or jazz aficionado should ignore this book, in which the novelist eloquently conveys the profound role that music has played in the lives of black Americans. As he wrote in the title essay, "it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live."

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From Library Journal

Ellison (1914-94) developed his love of music during his childhood in Oklahoma City, a bastion of Southwestern jazz in the 1920s and 1930s and the home of Jimmy Rushing, Charlie Christian, and the famous Blue Devils. As a young man, he lived with music, listening to it, analyzing it, and mingling with performers in the hopes of becoming one himself (he became a trumpeter). As editor O'Meally (Zora Neale Hurston Professor of Comparative Literature, Columbia Univ.) makes clear, jazz influenced both his thinking and writing. This fine collection consists mainly of previously uncollected jazz writings, among them "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz" and "Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday." These interesting and highly personal pieces offer details about a bygone era as well as insights into the formation of Ellison's mind and the writing of *Invisible Man* and other fiction in which jazz and its processes figured so strongly. Supplementing these are some pertinent short stories and excerpts from Ellison's novels, three interviews, and several letters all of which contribute to O'Meally's well-conceived design. In addition, O'Meally's illuminating introductions vastly enhance this work. Highly recommended.

- Harold V. Cordry, Baldwin, KS

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From [Booklist](#)

Before Ellison began a writing career that later established him as one of the greatest twentieth-century American novelists, he was an aspiring trumpeter dreaming of one day leading a great big band like his boyhood hero, Duke Ellington. Before writing *Invisible Man*, the novel that brought him fame, Ellison formulated many of his ideas about race and American culture in numerous essays and letters about jazz music and jazz musicians. These ideas also lie at the heart of today's jazz criticism. While his statements may be polarizing to some contemporary critics, his essays are unparalleled in their conceptualization and description of jazz as an American art form. They include paeans to jazz guitarist Charlie Christian and singer Jimmy Rushing, both friends of Ellison's from Oklahoma City; a moving tribute to Duke Ellington on his seventieth birthday; and, best of all, "Richard Wright's Blues," a review of Wright's memoir *Black Boy*, and arguably the first and best essay explaining the nexus between African American music and the tribulations of the African American experience. *Ted Leventhal*

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