

# SF & ALL THAT JAZZ

*From an article originally published in 'Jazz Monthly'*

by John Postgate

'I HAVE twice in my life found my lowbrow tastes had become highbrow more or less overnight. The first occasion, of which I have written before in these pages, happened in the early fifties when jazz suddenly became respectable, reviews and articles about it appeared in the expensive dailies and cultured weeklies, and jazz writers took to polysyllables. From being a musical moron I suddenly and disconcertingly found myself a person with *very up-to-date tastes*. Well, I got used to that, but blow me if it hasn't happened all over again. For as long as I can recall I have enjoyed a basinful of science fiction (SF to the *cognoscenti* . . .), having graduated through H. G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon to *Galaxy* and *Astounding Science Fiction* (alias *Analog*), which, as any real addict will tell you, are the cream of the pulp. Now, quite suddenly, the cultured weeklies solemnly review SF, chaps write to the editors about it (" . . . not literature . . ."), Kingsley Amis has written a book about it (provoking, incidentally, an awful squawk of displeasure from the real addicts) and "serious" writers such as Angus Wilson and William Golding declare themselves as secret indulgers. Blow me, I have *very up-to-date tastes* again.

'It is a curious thing that jazz and SF find themselves culturally in positions that have very much in common. The equivalent of New Orleans style of SF, the archetype from which all else is derived, is unquestionably the writings of H. G. Wells, Stapledon and Jules Verne. These writers set the basic idiom, and if their works are largely outmoded they are still on the whole good reading, and readers who come in at a later date never quite get the true inwardness of SF. Of the writers who follow the style, some do it well; some, seemingly, having missed certain essentials. It is regrettable that a couple of famous names come in the latter class: Sir Compton MacKenzie and Fred Hoyle have perpetrated SF novels which any pulp SF editor would have rejected out of hand. On the other hand there are Traddies such as John Wyndham who have done as well as and sometimes better than the originals. There are the modernists, e.g. Ray Bradbury or Theodore Sturgeon, who are writers of exceptional imagination but whose stories sometimes go too "far out", crossing the blurred zone that separates SF from whimsy or sheer fantasy. The mainstream of SF is represented by writers such as Pohl and Kornbluth, Asimov, Heinlein, Eric Russell, Arthur Clarke, etc., writers who realize that the idiom is as formalized as a Western or a whodunit and who know just when a bug-eyed monster or a space-warp is acceptable and just when it is not. These writers have their jam sessions, as it were, in the pulp SF magazines and then polish up their solo into a studio performance as a book or paperback. Sometimes they change the title in the process, and the reader takes some time to realize that the *Ornithology* he is reading he met before as *How High the Moon*. One cannot push the analogy too far, of course, but in addition to these resemblances it also seems that newcomers to SF, as to jazz, go either for the Traddies or the modernists, leaving older lags with the feeling that there has been a failure of communication somewhere along the line.

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'Another thing. Having, as I said, taken the opiate for many years, I have been struck by the number of references to jazz that crop up in SF, references that often indicate quite an enlightened taste among the authors. I recall, for instance, a story in which the chief character used some time-warp gadget to transport himself back to New Orleans before the First World War in order to visit jazz points. The author showed considerable detailed knowledge of the musicians playing at that time. In another story some unfortunate, who had mistakenly transferred himself to the twenty-second century, found some Benny Goodman sextet records in a junk heap and used them to keep a grip on his sanity, specifically mentioning the therapeutic virtues of Charlie Christian. At least some of the authors of this stuff seem hip; I wonder if the reverse is true? Do jazz fans and jazz musicians tend to favour SF for relaxation? Or are they compensatingly austere in their literary tastes? It would be interesting to know.'

*[Those who, like John Postgate, enjoy jazz and sf should remember Jazz Book Club. Same address. Ask for details.—Ed.]*

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