What a Wonderful World
The Magic Of Louis Armstrong’s Later Years
Ricky Riccardi

Feathlus, £12.99

Riccardi enjoys the enviable position of project architect at the Louis Armstrong House Museum located in Corona, New York. He’s thus well-placed to access its wealth of research material and to feel the continuing presence of the man himself, in the form of letters, photographs and clippings. Armstrong amassed over the years. That said this book is far more that just another trawl through the House archives; it’s an eloquent effort on Riccardi’s part to correct what he perceives as a wrong.

By concentrating on the final quarter-century of Armstrong’s career, Riccardi has set out to re-appraise a period in the great trumpeter’s performing life that has been dismissed as trivial or even demeaning by some observers.

In his introduction, Riccardi sets out his stall, offering the counter-argument to those who saw Armstrong as an “eye-rolling buffoon” and their writings about him as the definitive account of Armstrong’s final years. He documents the formation of the small group alternative to the big band (or the “little band”) for his remaining public, and recorded, performances. He’s clear-eyed about Armstrong’s moments of temper and about the symbiotic relationship with "Mr. Glaser" (Joe Glaser of Associated Booking Corporation) who oversaw Armstrong’s schedule, incidentally, making a ton of money for himself—and for Armstrong too.

Extracts from Armstrong’s letters, witness statements from producers and musicians as well as contemporary reviews and commentaries are woven expertly into the narrative. Where they are shown to be negative, Riccardi addresses the issues raised (for instance the unchanging All-Stars repertoire) and either refutes or supports them. As a musician himself, he’s not averse to noting a poor performance as well as highlighting Satchmo’s remarkable ability to cope with a demanding schedule and produce playing of exceptional quality. In other words, he’s an objective commentator and not a hagiographer; his book is all the better for that.

Armstrong’s exceptional stand on civil rights is more fully-documented than ever before, Riccardi making it clear that the trumpeter felt the sting of injustice so strongly that he felt impelled to speak out against the treatment of his people, even as those around him sought to distance themselves from his statements. Highly readable, well-researched and commendably argued, What a Wonderful World must rank with the very best Armstrong studies yet published. Properly referenced and well-illustrated, it covers a crucial time in the trumpeter’s life, encompassing his global travels, his extraordinary prominence and chart successes before his final decline into illness and gradual withdrawal from the life he loved. Highly recommended.

Peter Vacher

Makanda Ken McIntyre: Peace Thru Jazz
Derek Styles

Cadence Jazz Books/Worldsstyles@silver.co.uk, £20

Multi-reedman McIntyre never had a high profile and, for better or worse, his name was often linked with Eric Dolphy (with whom he made his first issued album, Looking Ahead). A contemporary of Dolphy and Ornette, he offered an alternative approach to the alto and bass clarinet with his early-1960s recordings on Prestige and United Artists. Though he was early in committing himself to a career in high school and college education, he continued to record under his own name and make striking contributions to records by Cecil Taylor and Charlie Haden, who was responsible for one of McIntyre’s few appearances in the UK.

What is billed as a “bio-discography” does that and more. It lists chronologically all that is known about its subject’s life and his live performances over a period of nearly five decades, but it also shows details of a huge number of private recordings, made with both colleagues and students. In addition to quoting copiously from the few interviews he gave, it also reprints in their entirety McIntyre’s lengthy liner notes for his own albums plus the often contradictory reviews they received. While this gives the impression of collaboration rather than original research, there are also brief quotes from the author’s own interviews with fellow musicians and with producer Esmond Edwards.

And by large, the voice of author-complier Styles is modest and almost anonymous, but he’s obviously devoted enormous energy to sifting through this material, assisted by McIntyre’s second wife whom he married six months before his death in 2001. Cadence’s layout and text-editing leaves something to be desired, and it’s frustrating to hear mention of photos which are not shown. But this is the kind of detailed study merited by many other musicians, and therefore deserves our support.

Brian Priestley

The Insanity Hoax: Exposing the Myth of the Mad Genius
Judith Schlesinger

Hodder & Stoughton, £19.99

It’s hardly normal for a jazz periodical to review a serious psychological book (as opposed to the pop psychology of Ross Russell on Parker or James Lincoln Collier on Duke). The clue is in the subtitle, of course, and it’s easy to see how the mad genius has been applied to jazz. Apparently, the theory goes all the way back to Plato, and its very antiquity has often been used to prove its validity—just like the flatness of the earth or the superiority of ancient Greek religion. A recent Radio 3 feature dealt with this theme via writers, painters and classical composers, but Schlesinger is different in including references to jazz artists.

A sometime drummer and singer, she’s a trained psychologist who taught the subject for a couple of decades, before becoming a contributor to All About Jazz and, having had contact with numerous creative people, has strong views about the idiocy of the prevailing opinion. Among the discussions of Beethoven, Van Gogh et al, and the way their biographies have been distorted to mirror popular prejudice, she makes passing mention of several favourite musicians and their real or imagined mental problems (strangely, no word about Mingus). And she reserves special scorn for an academic named Gregory Willis, who published a learned article ‘proving’ the high incidence of madness among jazzers—not via meeting or treating them, but through reading about them. I’d like to have seen Schlesinger take this further, for instance looking at Monk’s comment “I told you guys to act crazy” or the sceptical description of Gillespie being “stizzy like a fox” (though that term referred to female humans).

Fortunately, her writing style wraps the serious message in an entertaining polemic. Think of an on-form Stuart Nicholson, with added spice, and you’ll get a flavour of this highly readable book. Brian Priestley