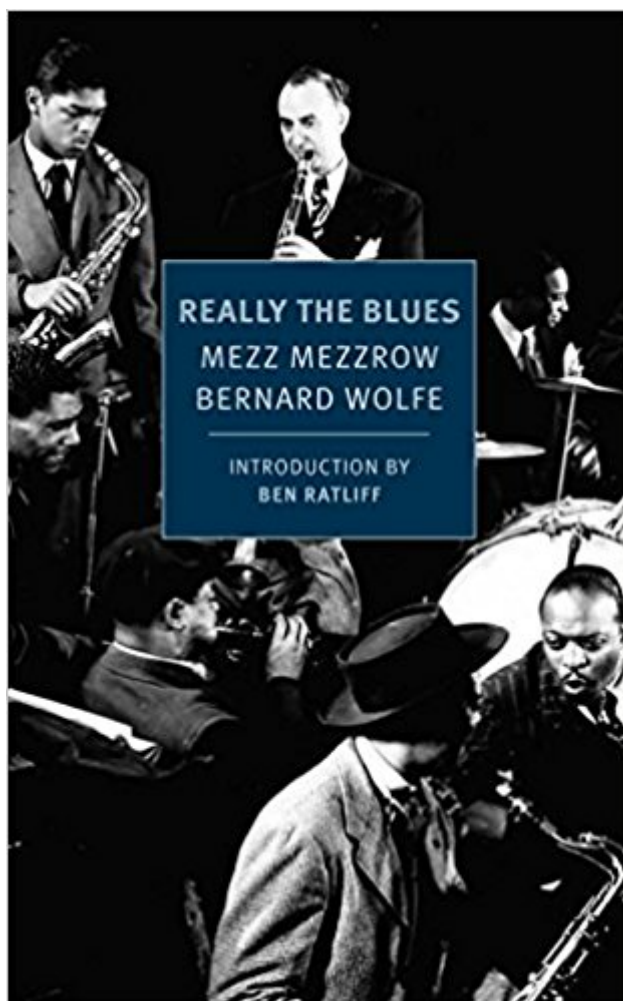


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Really The Blues (New York Review Books Classics)



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.”

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“American counter-culture classic *Really the Blues* [is] a stylized oral history that anticipates the Beat novel. *Really the Blues* is part quixotic adventure novel, part inside-scoop. Mezzrow’s voice is funny, impulsive, full of itself and often spectacularly scatological. Listening to *Mezz* is tremendous fun. The book’s true literary inheritance is its style. One of the great, flawed, jubilant, jive-talking characters of American literature.” —Martin Riker, *The Wall Street Journal* “The mighty Mezz was at once the greatest digger, the greatest chronicler, the

greatest celebrator of [jazz] culture, as well as being a principal actor on its main stage and contributor of its most characteristic fragrance – the pungent aroma of burning bush.

• Albert Goldman, *High Times* – “Mezz Mezzrow’s rambunctious enthusiasm for jazz and the world it shaped and defined keeps the pages turning... The lost world of the Jazz Age comes alive in these pages, replete with all the Chi-town bounce and streetwise braggadocio that came with the risqué territory... Mezzrow’s love of the music and the band’s lifestyle is palpable and infectious, giving his story a novelistic verve. In many ways, Mezz is the Augie March of jazz.

• Matt Hanson, *The Arts Fuse* – “As to the books of Bernard Wolfe, his extraordinary imagination, his range of styles and genres, should alone qualify him for a conspicuous role in 20th-century American literature.

• Thomas Berger – “Really the Blues returns us... to the roots of rock, to the roots certainly of beat and hence to the beginnings of the sixties counterculture through an extended look into the life of a Jewish boy... who turned his back on the middle class and all it had to offer to blow jazz in more creep joints and speakeasies and dancehalls than the law allows.

• Brooke Horvath, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* – “An intense, sincere and honest book. It makes all the novels with jazz backgrounds seem as phony as an Eddie Condon concert.

• Bucklin Moon, *The New Republic* – “An autobiography such as was never seen before beneath the moon.

• Ben Ray Redman, *The American Mercury*

Mezz Mezzrow (1899 – 1972) was born Milton Mesirow in Chicago to a Jewish family – “as respectable as Sunday morning.

• As a teenager, however, he was sent to Pontiac Reformatory for stealing a car; there he learned to play the saxophone and decided to devote his life to the blues. Beginning in the 1920s, he had an intermittent career as a sideman in jazz groups, and struck up friendships with many of the greats of the day, including Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke. Enamored of African American culture, he helped channel it to whiter and wider audiences, backing and producing significant recordings by Frankie Newton, Teddy Wilson, Sidney Bechet, and Tommy Ladnier, among others, and helping to spark the New Orleans revival of the late 1930s. In the 1940s, Mezzrow started his own record label, King Jazz Records. He spent the last years of his life in Paris.

Bernard Wolfe (1915 – 1985) was born in New Haven and attended Yale University, where he studied psychology. An active member of the labor movement, he moved to Mexico for eight months in 1937 to work as personal secretary and assistant to Leon Trotsky. In subsequent years, Wolfe held disparate jobs – from serving in the Merchant

Marines to working as a pornographic novelist to editing *Mechanix Illustrated* – while writing fiction and science fiction. His best-known work is the 1959 novel *The Great Prince Died*, a fictional account of Trotsky's assassination. Among his other books are *The Late Risers*, *In Deep*, *Limbo*, and *Logan's Gone*. Ben Ratliff has been a jazz and pop critic for *The New York Times* since 1996 and has written four books including *The Jazz Ear: Conversations over Music and Coltrane: The Story of a Sound*. His latest book is *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty*.

Vividly reports on the hip music scene of the 1920s and 1930s. Extremely prophetic on many topics including beatnik literature (Kerouac etc), rock n roll, hip hop, counterculture, persisting American racism, and legalized weed (ironically, just becoming illegal as this book takes place). Keith Richards tipped me to this title in his own book "A Life." Mezzrow's title seems to be a model for Richards' book, not to mention his rock n roll life.

I read this book when I was in High School. I re-read here some 40+ years later and I can see the profound effect it had on my thinking processes and how I dealt with my years as a musician. There is a lot that I drifted into in my life because of this book, both good and bad.

Published the year I was born this is a great personal history of both this country in post WWII era but also a very interesting saga about a white man's love affair with the Blues. Written in a 'jivin style' akin to the times this is a book to read slowly and savor going back in time to when Blues started going mainstream. Thank you New York Review of Books for reissuing this book. And thank you to the Wall Street Journal for the excellent review that brought this book to my attention.

As a musician, a reed player at that, I couldn't help but to identify with the struggles in honing one's skills to be accepted as a musician by one's peers. The book was written in many instances with the lyricism of words that a fine musician puts in note form. A truly inspiring and memorable book. There is a club about to be opened in Greenwich Village soon, in honor of his name. Considering his honorable history, the book is, and the club will be, a true testament to his contribution. As he put it himself...simply...yet poignantlylife is good!!

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' Mesirow

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" Mesirow is generally remembered as one of the best jazz musicians, Mesirow 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 around, 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 Mesirow's psyche comes not just from the stories, but in large part from the narrative style itself. Mesirow 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" Mesirow.

I first read this book in the mid 1950s. Then and now I enjoyed the author's deep insights into jazz, race, personalities and the culture of that world at that time. When I saw the book listed on I recalled whole passages which I had retained, not by memorization but by osmosis. Now I've got it back.
...Floyd Nower

I enjoyed reading this first hand account of the early days of jazz in Chicago, Detroit and New York.

Really interesting and entertaining survey of the music, the times and the places.

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