Exploring sax and drugs and all that jazz

By Pat Aufderheide

In ROUND MIDNIGHT, direc-
tor Bertrand Tavernier pays
art form of bebop, in foreign
currency. And it looks, great, but
the sound comes out funny.
The film is, above all, elegant,
as you might expect from a
filmmaker whose last Oscar
success was A Sunday in the Coun-
try—an exploration of Impression-ism
in standing, more or less,
as a moving image of an impression-
ism painting. But as in that earlier
work, as you get in ROUND MID-
night is an artistic impulse as
seen from the outside
In Thursday, Dale Turner,
Round Midnight's legendary jazz
artist caught in the self-destructive web again, seeking his chance for a comeback in Paris. Tenor
saxophonist Dexter Gordon plays
Tavernier—a character based loosely
on painter Bud Powell—with dignity
and wit that dominates his scenes, and may indeed transcend
the movie. Tendered with contemptu-
mous maturity by aging blues-
woman Buttercup (Lilliane Ro-
vere), Turner still plays wistfully
lovelorn ballads until an adoring
French fan, Francis (Francois
Cuzot), takes him in hand.
Then, obsession meets devo-
tion. The two men understand each
other, and Dale not only returns to
composing but captures beauty—is-
esence on recordings. A profound
intimacy develops, one etched in
sharply against the stability
of any woman in the film to
understand musical genius or its
expression.
Francis' wife, for instance, can
only admire the relationship from
afar, which makes her bit-
terly jealous; his daughter fran-
tically makes comparing claims on
his attention. Dale's hoochie
guides him a good word for his
playing, and his youthful pro-
tography played for a million
kilo—never quite gets what makes him tick.
His success gives Turner the
confidence to try a comeback at
home; he and Francis plunge into
the corrupt environment of sleazy
clubs and bad drugs in New York.
(Martin Scorsese plays a cameo
role as the scummy agent.) Fran-
cis, a drug addict, returns to Paris, after
defailing to convince Turner to save
himself. There, he hears of
Turner's death, but still can sav-
or his old look on home movies and
his sound on the previous record-
ings.

Like many of the French, Tavernier
was launched well before the
riots. And it can be argued that
the violence actually hobbled the War
on Poverty.
But then Katz also quotes from
Piven and Cloward's excellent
New Class War, which, to my
mind, presents a superior analysis
of welfare, seeing it as an outcome of
the class struggle rather than an
upper-class tactic to avoid strug-
gle. This last perspective underlines
Katz's conclusions and his view of
the future. In his last sentence he
states that "There is an American
semi-welfare state [this properly
bitter description of the result of
the history he describes] was not
inevitable, and its future is ours to
choose."
In the Shadow of the Poor-
house's greatest strength is the
wealth of historical detail and
analysis that it describes, and ac-
counts for, the cheapest, most in-
adequate welfare state in the West-
ern world. As Katz concedes at
the outset, this paradox has to be faced:
"Diffused through every layer of government; partly
distinct, partly private, partly mixed: incomplete and
still not universal; defeating its own objec-
tives. American welfare practice is
incoherent and irrational.

Still, this crazy system resists funda-
mental change."
If we are to make a fundamental
departure from this outrageous his-
tory, then it will not happen simply
t hrough appealing to, or even com-
pletely organizing, the poor them-
se lves. Their mobilization is an ab-
solutely necessary condition of a genuinly democratic and
bureaucratic solution to misery.
But it is not a sufficient condition for
changing the structures of in-
justice that are deeply rooted in
our history and class relations. That
requires linking the needs of the
poor with those of the working
people and middle class—and
even with the Yuppies who have
been discovering that they have
been priced out of the private
home market.
That is why I find the most
explicitly political essay in the
Danziger-Weinberg collection—
Hugh Helco's attack on the "social
democratic" solution—so utterly
wrong. There is no doubt, as Helco
argues, that the poor are not a
social class in the sense that the
workers, middle-class and rich
concept of "poverty," like
the related notion of the "Third
World," incorporates the most
varied miseries under a category that is
more statistical than political.
This is one of the many reasons
why the various visions of the poor
as a new "proletariat" have failed
in theory and practice. But Helco
widely overgeneralizes his insight.
That there are enormous problems
in creating a broad front of all
the exploited—based on race, gender
and culture as well as class—is
painfully obvious.
One cannot, as Helco proposes,
simply rely on the innate decency
of many Americans and "social
statesmanship" to deal with a post-
Reagan future that may well be
closer than many people think.
The next time the nation turns left we
had better be ready. Just as we did
not know in February 1960 that
four blacks who went to a North
Carolina lunch counter and de-
manded the right to coffee were
inaugurating a new generation, so
we cannot possibly anticipate
when history will turn another
corner. But perhaps, armed with
the scholarly knowledge so care-
fully assembled in the Danziger-
Weinberg collection, and, fore-
warned by Katz' insightful history
of the semi-welfare state, we can
create a new majority committed
to the abolition of poverty at
home and throughout the world.

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ica (DSA).

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How many people know, for in-
stance, that the Lundein Bill, of-
fered as an alternative to
Roosevelt's exceedingly moderate
Social Security Act, proposed
waged-related benefits adminis-
tered by decentralized popular
committees with funds financed
through taxes on the upper middle
class and the rich? That was an
alternative, as Katz shows, to a
system that "has bifurcated social
welfare along class lines," provid-
 ing social security without stigma
for the middle class and "relish,"
ambitiously and with humiliating
restictions, for the poor.
Katz follows the interpretive
line of Frances Fox Piven and
Richard Cloward's Regulating
the Poor, which argues that "time
and again, the budget that has been
extended or redesigned to promote
social order by appeasing protest
or disciplining the poor." That is,
true, nine times out of ten—but
omitting the 10th time over-
simplifies the analysis.
Katz writes that "the escalation
of benefits after the great urban
risings in the `60s is one particularly
vivid recent example." But the War
on Poverty and Great Society pro-
grams like Medicare and Medicaid
apply a heavy icing of reverence
to the consummately social theme
of the role of the artist and artistic
evativity in the modern period.
Not that Round Midnight lacks
perspective. What saves the movie
from sycophancy is the clever use
of Francis as a slightly silly but
still authentically devoted fan,
someone for whom being a fan is
legitimate, because his ability to
appreciate has not only enriched
his life as a consumer but liberated
him from the conformist artist. "If I
am anything today," he says,
melodramatically to his pathe-
 tically canted wife, "it is be-
cause of him." We never see Fran-
cis work as a commercial artist,
but this is an important part of
his meaning in this film as a dedicated fan, the comment can't help but ring ironic.
A Fan's notes
Tavernier's been careful in inter-
views to fend off criticism of the
film as flimsy; he describes its
structure as evolving the expec-
tation of jazz. But nobody said
to director had to know best what he
had done. It's not an action script,
but neither is it jazz-in-pictures.
Rather it's a meditation on roman-
tic obsession, as experienced by a
fan. And further, it has a message:
Round Midnight is structured as
an object lesson in What Amer-
icans Never Understood about
Their Great Art, as delivered to us
by a French Everyman.
Tavernier's good enough to
make the film move from scene to
scene, and Gordon's good enough
to keep our patient while we wait
for his sly, gentle glide over the
landscape. But the movie succeeds
as an art house special because
it caters to some studly American
anxieties; our guilt over the racist
environment in which jazz
emerged (a feeling safely exer-
cised on the past but which fails
generally to extend to the current
scene in black music), embarrassment
over the gaudy commercial-
ization of pop music marketing (which
doesn't inhibit consumer habits)
and the inferiority complex that
leads us to believe that only Euro-
peans recognize true art.
And that last one is particularly
ironic. Because for all the ele-
gence and hero-worship, this
movie misses the boat about the
music. This is a movie about jazz
where the music, almost without
exception, features the melodic
theme but not the improvisation.
The group sound without the cru-
tical solos that define an artist.
The musical segments are tightly con-
That's Entertainment!

The ABC miniseries America has its origins in political controversy, and the controversy's escalating. The US is recouping its lost war after a Soviet takeover of the U.S. was put into motion through trials and errors. The ABC novel, The Day After—the TV film, dramatizes the aftermath of nuclear war. Months after Soviet protest over the miniseries, the U.S. is now getting into the fray. In the miniseries, Soviet troops gain entry to the country dressed as members of the U.S. Special Service unit, and among their atrocities is gang rape. If ABC doesn't strike the offending reference—and which was chosen to match U.S. conservative hostility to the U.S.—the miniseries may be cut off after ABC's sale of permits to such films as In Our Own Backyard, about uranium mining, and Up in the Clouds, about acid rain. The Center for Constitutional Rights sued the government on First Amendment grounds, and two weeks ago, District Court Judge A. Wallace Tashima agreed with them. "This is a blow to the U.S. policy of using the Xerox Art as a tool to censor films," said the Center's David Lerner.

Revenge of the Zapped

The age of nihilistic seduction marches forward, even faster forward. Lights-fingered video consumers who've been fast-forwarding through commercials on mounted programs on their VCRs have been giving advertisers headaches. Now comes the relief, for advertisers at least: an Advertising Age magazine article showed that, while the majority of home-tapers do "zap" commercials, many remember them anyway. Some 2 percent of the zap-happy viewers even name the brand. And nearly a fifth of the tappers have reported that they take their fingers off the button to watch some commercials. The old-fashioned way—particularly favorites include Miller Lite, Burger King, and Red Lobster—was to twist the claim that new technologies bring new freedom to consumer choice; you can choose, it appears, how to take your commercials, but not to block them away.

Public Broadcasting: Who's in Charge Here?

For months, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) board—long torn by sharply political Reagan-era appointments—has been hammering out new controversial. Appointments went up to Congress for consideration. Congress left town without resolving the issues. Two right-wing favorites withdrew their nominations, and Nancy Reagan’s former press secretary Sherri Tate was not confirmed. But some things are settled. Chairwoman Soria Landau, staunch Reagan supporter, wife of New York Times TV critic John Corry, and noted for such policies as refusing to approve a CPB trip to visit Russian television executives (they might be taken for spies), was reappointed. Two appointees who made it through are Daniel Brenner, until recently senior advisor to FCC Chairman Mr. "Regulation" Fowler, and Republican congressman Keith Towery. No one expects the administration to stop playing politics with the organization charged with oversight of public radio and TV. When Congress interviews. But the game is getting expensive for the health of the already-frail public broadcasting system.

Check This Out, Mr. Meese

The Meese pornography commission has launched a battery of proposals to keep America clean. Britain's Channel 4 TV has pioneered one option. According to rock newsmagazine Rolling Stone, the channel's "Secret Confedrate" (a must-read source of music reporting and criticism, available from Box 1073, Maywood, NJ 07607), when sexual material is on-screen a small white triangle (?) flashes. RKC speculates: "This symbol is undoubtedly also useful for those who aren't always sure if what they're seeing ought to arouse them or not."

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