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John Coltrane's Giant Steps (Richard Jackson Books (Atheneum Hardcover))



Synopsis

You may be surprised at the tricky music a box, a snowflake, some raindrops, and a kitten can make. Right before your eyes. And on the pages of this book. There is someone backstage watching, encouraging our performers but keeping them under control. Why not listen along?

Book Information

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Age Range: 4 - 7 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 2

Customer Reviews

This innovative visual deconstruction of one of jazz saxophonist Coltrane's most beloved compositions may be Raschka's (Mysterious Thelonious) most ambitious picture book yet. After a playful introduction ("Good evening. And thank you for coming to our book"), the unseen narratorconductor introduces the performers a box, a snowflake, some raindrops and a kitten a tongue-in-cheek nod to Coltrane's version of "My Favorite Things"). The book does not require previous awareness of the jazz great's work, however. Each performer (representing percussion, bass, piano and sax) appears in a different color and shape (Raschka riffs on primary red, yellow and blue, and the basic square, triangle and circle). The performance begins, only to be interrupted when the kitten ("the melody on top of everything") takes steps a little too large ("People, people! What happened?"). Some coaching finally produces what Coltrane called "sheets of sound." Raschka's transparent watercolors layer colors and shapes the way a musician would notes and

harmonies. Stunningly simple, the concept provides a compelling introduction to Coltrane's genius. Those who possess a little musical knowledge will delight in such arch references as "remixed by Chris Raschka" on the title page and the conductor's hilarious critique ("First of all, raindrops, you were rushing on page 19"). Even the jacket repeats the book's central conceit: a clear plastic wrap featuring the kitten, painted in thick black outline, overlays the other elements. A must for jazz enthusiasts and, for first-timers, a clever introduction to this wildly creative musical genre. Ages 4-7. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

PreSchool-Grade 5-Paw forward, the cat featured in Raschka's *Simple Gifts* (Holt, 1998) graces the clear cellophane jacket of this book. Her thick, black, inked contours overlay the watercolor, biomorphic forms on the book's front cover—a box, snowflake, and raindrop—the performers of Coltrane's jazz classic "Giant Steps." An offstage narrator/conductor prepares listeners for "swirling, leaping, tumbling 'sheets of sound.'" In the ensuing double spreads, the 4/4 tempo is introduced by a quartet of raindrops (drums); the foundation is then formed with an overlay of boxes (the bass). Snowflakes (the piano) build up next to represent harmony, and, at last, the kitten (sax) dances across the shapes, bringing the melody. The conductor, however, is not pleased, so after some comments, the piece is played again, winding down to a quiet curtain call of the four isolated images. The sequential design and layering of the organic forms are a creative, joyful, and energetic match for the pulsing momentum and resolution in the music. Raschka manages to distill body and soul and "remix" Coltrane's sound graphically, and the book offers an engaging intellectual and sensory experience. Presenting it with the music itself is a must. Bravo, maestro!—Wendy Lukehart, Washington DC Public Library Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I read the other reviews and was very excited. We are big fans of "The Jazz Fly" and jazz in general. This was very disappointing.

I stumbled upon John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* in my local library. It offered so much more than I expected in a children's book! The CD included with the book is a must; this is really meant to be experienced as an entire package. The CD offers two tracks: one with page turn cues, one without. The story's "performers" are some raindrops on drums, a box playing string bass, a snowflake on piano, and an adorable kitten on tenor sax. (Get it? Raindrops? Snowflake? Kitten?) Narrator Richard Allen has a laid back, very chill style of reading - a perfect fit for such a cool piece of jazz. Allen also serves as "conductor" for our imaginary ensemble, helping them fix trouble spots

and find a groove. Chris Raschka's lovely illustrations seem very simple, but become more and more complex as the story progresses. As new layers are introduced in the music, Raschka's watercolors layer upon one another. I loved that; what a perfect way for listeners to visualize Coltrane's distinct style of music! This book is an artistic and musical literary adventure for young readers.

Chris Raschka is one of our most ambitious children's book illustrators. When he's good, he's great, and he wins the Caldecott Award for best children's illustration. When he tries too hard, he's sly but opaque, clever but obscure. "Waffle," for example, plays with concept at the expense of clarity, and the result is a disappointing mish-mosh. This book is on the heady side, but musically-inclined youngsters guided by a talented teacher, parent, or other adult will enjoy Raschka's imaginative deconstruction/reconstruction of Coltrane's magnificent jazz piece. Raschka almost nails it with this visual and verbal description of saxophonist John Coltrane's incredible "Giant Steps," a landmark number of dizzying complexity, speed, and joy that most energetic youngsters would like on its own. However, much of the appeal lies in a very intellectual exercise requiring levels of abstract thinking and reading ability beyond most of the young audience who will be attracted to the picture book format. However, teenagers, pre-adolescents with a musical bent, and adults will appreciate Raschka's sensitive evaluation of Coltrane's talent. Younger kids might like the colorful (although not vividly colorful) pictures, and the pictures of the raindrops, snowflake, and cat. However, these by themselves are not that appealing, and the song's "narration" is clever but not a very interesting story. That is why the book doesn't quite work for early elementary school-age kids reading it on their own. The most fascinating aspect of Raschka's "Giant Steps" is that he purposely draws the song all wrong! The book disappoints, and then tricks us, because Raschka knows exactly what he was doing. The cat narrator leads the shapes and colors in a visual performance of Coltrane's number, but the impression is, well, unimpressive. Even for a metaphor of Coltrane's music, the colors look blurry and the composition is unfocused. However, at a break in the performance (on pages 24 and 25), Raschka gently tells us that the preceding images (by Raschka) were not quite right, were not Coltrane. The "performers" (and the reader) must understand that Coltrane was strong, yes, but "strong yet light." The colors should be rich, not "muddy," because "Coltrane's music is dense but transparent." And while Coltrane did blow "a fountain of notes, a shower of notes...those notes made lines that were dynamic and strong and vivid." In a remarkable performance of his own, Raschka redraws the musical sequence to reflect these attributes, and this time he captures the rhythms, sounds, and energetic clarity of Coltrane. It's a masterful

achievement, but I don't know how many kids will appreciate it. A dazzling, albeit puzzling, work that stands, as Ellington once said, "beyond category."

"Good evening. And thank you for coming to our book. We have something very special for you tonight. It's John Coltrane's marvelous and tricky composition, "Giant Steps," performed for you by a box, a snowflake, some raindrops, and a kitten..." So begins the conductor's introduction to Chris Raschka's brilliant visual jazz rendition of Giant Steps. First he explains a little about who John Coltrane is, and how his music was composed, "...[he] wrote music which, in his hands, became swirling, leaping, tumbling "sheets of sound." That's what he called it. But why tell you when we can show you?" Then the composition begins with the raindrops, the tempo, "not too fast and not too slow." Next he layers the box, the base, "...the bottom. It's something to build on." Here comes the snowflake, the piano, "showing us the harmony, the beautiful frame." And last, the kitten, the melody, "watch her take some giant steps across the page." As Mr Raschka "conducts", problems begin to occur, the shapes and colors collapse, and he finally yells STOP! "People, people! What happened? Okay, okay, let's take a look at some trouble spots." After detailing when, where and how each shape went wrong, and giving constructive directions, the composition begins again. "Let's take it from page 14. Raindrop, box, snowflake, kitten. GO. Sheets of color. Sheets of sound. Bravo. Bravo, everyone." Mr Raschka's entertaining text, written in an engaging, conversational style, is informative and enlightening. His layering of shapes and colors provides a clever and creative visual understanding of jazz and John Coltrane's "sheets of sound." Together word and art dazzles, Giant Steps comes to life on the page, and imaginations soar. Perfect for youngsters 6-10, John Coltrane's Giant Steps is Chris Raschka at his very best, and is an innovative and inventive introduction to understanding jazz, no young music lover should miss.

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