

white versions of black music out, as kept out other contemporary African American composers who have written long Ellington-inspired musical works. These have been less worried about 'impurity' and generic boundaries between popular and 'serious' concert hall music. Composers and musicians like Sun Ra, John Carter or George Russell have done such large-scale epic works that are distinctly African American in musical sensibility and form and which aim both to commemorate the sufferings of their people and to project a transformed, liberated future for them. But their music does not sound like the 'classic' jazz regularly performed at the Lincoln Center.

Thus a contemporary controversy about Wynton Marsalis' conception of the true African American jazz heritage harks back to a debate begun 100 years ago by W.E.B. Du Bois about the history and utopian projection contained in the 'sorrow songs.' Anderson's book is an admirably thorough, subtle and careful analysis of its continued relevance for understanding contemporary African American culture.

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Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. x + 1167 pp., 32 pp. of black and white photographs. ISBN: 0-394-52836-0; \$35 cloth.

The American journalist and historian Robert A. Caro has by now come a long way with a remarkable book project. Caro's publication of *Master of the Senate*, the third volume in his series on the life of Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), reaffirms his position as perhaps the foremost political biographer of our time. Caro has been studying Johnson for nearly three decades, and so far his efforts have yielded exceptional results. With its well over 1,100 pages, the present volume sheds more light on the uses and abuses of power than we can find in a mountain of political science textbooks.

The first volume in the series is called *The Path to Power* (1982). In great detail it covers Johnson's coming of age in impoverished Hill Country, Texas, the first contacts he made with political life in Washington, D.C., and his first congressional campaigns. The book ends with Johnson's defeat in the 1941 Senate election, which took place when he was still only 32 years of age. Already in that first book Johnson comes across as a full-fledged power-broker, hungry too for wealth, and willing to do anything to win political favor. Caro also points to positive sides in Johnson's character, sides known to only a few. Already at the start of his career Johnson demonstrated, along with a strong desire for money and power, his empathy with people who were poor and vulnerable, plus a phenomenal ability to get things done. This ability was one day to serve voters in the poor constituencies of Texas very well.

Volume two, *Means of Ascent* (1990), describes three phases in Johnson's life during the 1940s: his brief and less than distinguished military service during World War II,

his purchase of a failing Austin radio station which in time made him a rich man, and the Senate election campaign of 1948. The description of how LBJ succeeded in winning this campaign with the help of slander and election fraud reads almost like a suspense thriller. Unfortunately, Caro's portrayal is marred by an excessive focus on the negative features of his main character, while LBJ's main opponent, a Texas politician by the name of Coke Stevenson, comes across as a virtual angel.

In *Master of the Senate*, Caro now focuses on Lyndon Johnson the legislator. LBJ was sworn in as senator from Texas in January 1949. At that time the Senate was governed by time-honored but extremely complex rules. The most important of these was the seniority system, which affected all the workings of the Senate. It could take years before a senator acquired enough seniority to obtain a position on one of the Senate's powerful committees. And to become a committee chairman might in the best of circumstances take almost until retirement. New senators were expected to keep their profiles low and abide by rules set by their older colleagues.

Lyndon Johnson was no ordinary newcomer, however. He gave several speeches already in his beginning years, and did his best to befriend and flatter the most powerful senators. He painstakingly mastered the intricacies of parliamentary procedure. After just two years he had the connections he needed to become Assistant Leader of his party. Two more years and he was able to get elected Democratic Leader of the Senate. After the Democrats won the midterm elections in 1954, LBJ became Majority Leader, the most powerful man in the Senate. At that time he was the youngest Majority Leader in the nation's history and the first man ever to advance to the position after just a single term in office.

The Senate had a poor reputation at the time Johnson began his ascent. To many the Senate was a reactionary stronghold standing firm against the forces of change, a stolid fortress where racist Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans had for almost a century defiantly quelled demands that the government act to promote social justice. The majority leader ordinarily had little recourse when his most intractable colleagues chose to oppose him; the filibuster and the seniority system ensured that the committee chairmen had the real power and could effectively block any legislation they did not like.

Brilliant on Johnson's part was how within the very framework of this dearth of efficiency he managed to achieve power and put it to work so effectively. Within two weeks of his taking over leadership of the Senate he succeeded in altering the seniority system, an accomplishment long viewed as an impossibility. Now he could distribute seats among Democratic senators at will, and reward or punish as he wished. This increased his control substantially and diminished the influence of the once all-powerful committee chairmen.

Once Johnson had acquired power – more than any majority leader before had ever amassed – he reformed the Senate and actually made it work. One is amazed to read

how LBJ transformed this ancient upper chamber from an impotent discussion club to an effectively operating legislative body. For Johnson the Senate's task was to pass laws, not debate them. His central concern was to achieve results and he did this by applying every stratagem of flattery, plea-making, coercion, and pressure that he could devise.

No majority leader in history has practiced the art of persuasion better than Lyndon Johnson. To him politics was a matter of reaching compromises and building coalitions, not of expressing principled positions or engaging in lofty rhetoric. Results are what he wanted and what he ultimately achieved. A high-point in this book is the story of how against all odds LBJ succeeded in maneuvering to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first such legislation to come out of the Senate since 1875. Leading liberals had struggled for years to pass laws that would assure America's black population its freedoms and rights. All had failed miserably. Johnson had previously voted against all civil rights legislation. This is to be explained in part by the fact that his political base was among bigoted Southern senators and his economic base among reactionary Texas businessmen. Nonetheless, LBJ was sympathetic to the cause of suffering black people, and according to Caro by around 1957 he had come to realize that action on the issue could no longer be delayed. When that same year President Eisenhower proposed modest civil rights legislation, the Senate Majority Leader shrewdly seized the moment. Johnson knew that to get legislation through he would have to engineer a compromise acceptable to both conservatives and liberals – another feat often looked upon as an impossibility.

Caro's description of how Johnson was finally able to ram through the 1957 Civil Rights Act is brilliant. Reading it one realizes that it must have taken the author years of study in the archives and hundreds of interviews to put together such a full account. Anthony Lewis, in reviewing Caro's book, remarks that he himself clearly did not know the half of what was going on, even though as a reporter for the *New York Times* he followed the legislative drama closely.<sup>5</sup> In the form in which it passed, the new legislation was watered down and led to only limited improvements for blacks, concerning mainly their voting rights. But even this much was a step in the right direction and set the stage for the important Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which were adopted during Lyndon Johnson's presidency.

All who are interested in modern American history and only remember LBJ as a despised war-time president, should read this book. Caro heaps praise on Johnson's skills as legislator and majority leader. He goes so far as to say that, except for Abraham Lincoln, no president has done more for the black population of America than Lyndon Johnson. Nevertheless, LBJ had his roots in the Deep South, and he talked the familiar talk of racism, referring to blacks as 'nigger' and 'boy.' How is

5. Anthony Lewis, "Master of the Senate": LBJ's Friendly Persuasion,' *New York Times*, 28 April 2002.

such a discrepancy to be accounted for? Just as in earlier volumes, Caro explains the contradiction by pointing to two competing elements in Johnson's personality: his ambition to acquire power on the one hand and his compassion for the downtrodden on the other. Both traits came to light in his style of wielding power, though any time they appeared on a collision course with one another, it was the side of ambition that won out. In the struggle to enact the 1957 Civil Rights Act, however, LBJ's ambition and compassion ran neck and neck: he realized he needed to improve his civil rights record in order to broaden his political base and achieve the dream of his life, which was to become president.

Professional historians show a mix of opinions of Robert Caro's work. They often laud his skill as a narrator and marvel at his ability to dig information out of the most obscure archives. But some historians are just as quick to find faults with Caro's books, the most common of which is that the author has a tendency to be too hard on his protagonist. This may be true for the second volume, but hardly for the new one. Here one may plausibly argue that out of desire to highlight Johnson's accomplishments, Caro sometimes goes too far in belittling the majority leaders who preceded him.<sup>6</sup> Another criticism leveled at Caro is that he has an obsession with power. Stanley Kutler, an emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin and a chronicler of Richard Nixon, claims that Caro 'can't abide power' and that he even 'hates power.'<sup>7</sup> If this is true, and it may be, it is still hardly the main point. Caro is clearly fascinated with power, especially political power, and he does his best to explore it from all possible angles. As I see it the problem is not Caro's attitude toward power per se, but rather that his single-minded focus on it tends to squeeze much of the substance of politics out of the picture. For its length, the book contains remarkably little about the political issues of the time and the arguments used in addressing them. The author may consciously or not have succumbed to the view of his protagonist that politics is first and foremost about the uses (and abuses) of power.

It remains for Caro to write about Johnson's years as vice-president and president, explore his relationship with the Kennedys, and take us through the triumphs of his career (the civil rights laws, the Great Society) as well as its tragedies (the racial riots, the Vietnam War). This is a tall order for any writer, let alone one who is soon to be 67 years old. Lewis L. Gould, professor emeritus of history at the University of Texas, has stated that Caro's problem is his age and that he is 'standing at the foot of Mount Everest.'<sup>8</sup> Let us hope Robert Caro will be able to climb that mighty mountain and show the world the view from its top.

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6. Cf. William E. Leuchtenburg, 'Wheeling and Dealing,' *Washington Post*, 18 April 2002.

7. Quoted in Linton Weeks, 'Power Biographer,' *Washington Post*, 24 April 2002.

8. Quoted in Weeks.