TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

'Jazz' strikes a stylish chord

Jazz, more than any other US art form, is closely tied to the notion of racial ownership. The visual and literary arts are largely immune to this phenomenon. Whereas most people cannot clearly picture what is meant by a "black" painting or prose style, they have specific ideas about what "black music" connotes.

For much of its early history, jazz was reviled for its allegedly corruptive effects on white America. The long-defunct New York Herald wrote in 1914: "America has fallen prey to the Negro soul under the influence of ragtime."

In the latter half of the century, it became fashionable to make the reverse allegation: that whites had appropriated black music and profited from the re-branding. Now, even though most prominent jazz musicians are black, most of its fans are not. As the eminent documentary film-maker Ken Burns notes of a 1960s jazz group: "The Chicago Art Ensemble never succeeded in finding a black audience, attracting its largest following among white college students in France."

Strangely, the terms "black music" and "white music" can swap meanings, yet the divide between them remains immutable.

Racial politics arise in any serious discussion of jazz, and Burns has boldly opened this Pandora's box. His highly anticipated 10-part, 19-hour documentary on the history of jazz is the final instalment in his trilogy of Americana, the unlikely sequel to *The Civil War* and *Baseball*. With those previous oeuvres, he was apotheosised as America's bard, free to write his own ticket.

As his *Jazz* project demonstrates, he has used this freedom wisely. Here he abandons the buttoned-down textbook objectivity of his previous works. At long last, we see his passion, anger, and

Louis Armstrong, photographed in the 1930s Frank Driggs Collection

beginning Monday January 8, at 9pm. Check local listings.)

Jazz, as Burns explains, arose partly out of one of the ugliest traditions in US entertainment history: the minstrel show. Burns bravely suggests that these shows, while unequivocally racist, involved a far more complicated dynamic than is often acknowledged. Not only would whites don black face makeup, but blacks would likewise wear white face makeup, or black face on top of white face, and the indistinguishable heap would exaggeratedly mimic one another.

Ragtime and blues musicians riffed on operatic arias and French folk songs; white musicians echoed in tandem, further improvising and syncopating the tunes. Says renowned trumpeter Wynton Marsalis: "[Minstrel shows] became a forum for blacks and whites alike to

most accurate metaphor for jazz.

But *Jazz* isn't just a chronicle of race struggle. A documentary on jazz would hardly be worthwhile without those glorious songs, and Burns proves masterful, almost manipulative, at weaving music with narrative.

His methods prove most emotive in the segments on Louis Armstrong. The legendary trumpeter is discussed in each of the 10 chronologically arranged instalments, even if it is just to mention that he was born (in 1901), had entered his teens, or that his mother had changed jobs. While this initially seems like monomania on Burns' part, he manages to hypnotise the viewer into believing that modern America's underestimation of Armstrong is symptomatic of the overall neglect of jazz, and that it would be

straight.

Forget "Hello, Dolly", which Armstrong detested. Everything we need to know about the true Armstrong is encapsulated in an obscure film clip from the early 1930s, in which a youthful Armstrong sings a simple ditty called "Dinah".

It is an unremarkable song in its own right; the word "Dinah" is, of course, rhymed with "Carolina". But to watch him sing it makes life worth living. He seems to be almost demoniacally possessed by the indescribably beautiful sounds magically issuing from him.

Cultural critic Stanley Crouch observes that, after that performance, "no one could go back to the old [falsetto] way of singing [jazz tunes]".

Burns does not pretend that *Jazz* is a comprehensive work, and no sweeping history should be chided for its omissions – unless, that is, it is 19 hours long. I cannot imagine why Burns has all but omitted any discussion of music theory, with only the most cursory explanation given to the concepts of syncopation and improvisation.

Burns becomes increasingly dissolute with the march of time. Segment 10, spanning 1961 to the present, may as well be called "Everything goes to pot".

Some incoherent blame is laid on the Beatles. Abbey Lincoln, a jazz singer who has seen better days, says hysterically: "Someone came to kill [jazz]. They brought the musicians from England and covered us over like a blanket."

The documentary, while wonderful, ends on a disappointingly shallow note.

The experts interviewed for the documentary get too caught up in their own aphorisms.

If one more person in this programme declared that "jazz is the quintessential American art form", or that jazz was "a dialogue", or "like democracy", I was going to crawl up the wall. Fortunately, Burns' stylish