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A MOMA retrospective of Larry Clark's films includes "Passing Through," which dramatized the jazz world from the inside.

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One of the Greatest Movies About Jazz.1

There are few great movies about jazz musicians, not least because there have been few Black directors in Hollywood. One of the best movies about jazz, the 1977 film "Passing Through," was made by the independent filmmaker Larry Clark as his thesis film at U.C.L.A. Clark was one of the leading members of the so-called L.A. Rebellion, a group of Black filmmakers that included Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Haile

Gerima, Billy Woodberry, and Jamaa Fanaka. In "Passing Through," which is playing Sunday at moma in a retrospective of Clark's films, the director (whose great-uncle was the outstanding, short-lived pianist Sonny Clark) dramatized the world of jazz from the inside: he showed that the practical struggles of jazz musicians are inseparable from the inner life—the spiritual essence—of the music.

"Passing Through" is built on a historical framework of the business of jazz—the connections among night clubs, the record industry, and the underworld that made the world of classic jazz a perilous one, all the more so because of racist indifference to the fate of Black artists. When Charles Mingus, the great bass player, composer, and bandleader, established a record company in the early nineteen-fifties to present modern jazz as he and other musicians saw fit, gangsters threatened him and blocked the company's albums from distribution in record stores. When, later in the decade, the saxophonist Gigi Gryce formed a music-publishing company and a record label, he faced similar threats. At a time when modern jazz was thriving, musicians were sometimes paid (even by bandleaders) in drugs or offered pittances for sessions in order to feed their habits. "Passing Through" distills

the history of mob brutality toward jazz artists into a drama of one young saxophonist in Los Angeles and his own small but passionate circle of musicians.

The musician at the center of the film, a saxophonist named Eddie Warmack (Nathaniel Taylor), has just been released from prison; his former partner, Trixie (Sherryl Thompson), is now with another man. Warmack reunites with his musician friends, works on getting his chops back, and gets involved with Maya (Pamela Jones), a photographer who is assigned to take his picture for a glossy-magazine story. But his past, and the past of the musical scene that he's in, keeps coming back, like a recurring nightmare, and its enduring anguish drives him and others in his artistic circle to desperate measures.

Warmack was incarcerated as a result of underworld violence—he rushed to the aid of another musician, named Skeeter (Bob Ogburn), whom gangsters targeted for his effort to control the rights to his own music. They blinded Skeeter, and Warmack killed one of the assailants. Now the musicians are organizing again: they have a band and a basement club to play in. They attract the attention of a white music executive, who's also plying musicians with drugs, and a white A. & R.

man, who wants Warmack to play more commercial music. The musicians are trying to establish their own record label, on which they'll issue their music as they see fit, and the record companies, getting wind of the plans, again unleash gang violence against the musicians—which Maya happens to witness and to photograph. Danger is ambient; Trixie brings Warmack a gun, and Warmack organizes an armed revenge squad.

The extraordinary ambition of "Passing Through" is to break through the surfaces of drama and to get the spirit of jazz, and the real-world circumstances of its creation, onto film. (The music is composed by Horace Tapscott, whose group performs it, and the soundtrack also features music by Charlie Parker, Eric Dolphy, Grant Green, and other luminaries.) The movie's opening sequence is a montage of musical creation, featuring multiple exposures of a vigorously modern group seen in mood-rich tones of blue and red; the rapid fingering of a saxophone and the angular athleticism of drumming are superimposed to give visual identity to the music's rhythms. The sequence fuses documentary and impressionism, recording and transformation, while also crowning its painterly

energy with yet another rhythmic red light that's a part of the jazz life: a rotating one atop a police car.

Throughout the action, the past emerges not only as an influence, a set of facts, or a subject of discussion but as an audiovisual presence. Clark places personal and political history in the foreground, at the same narrative level as the characters' present-tense dramas, marking memory and history as active forces in the construction of personality and community. Musical performances are punctuated by documentary scenes of the violent repression of Black people's protests in the civil-rights movement, fires burning as a result of riots, the police occupation of cities, the uprising at Attica and its violent suppression—and of dramatized scenes of brutal treatment that Warmack endured and witnessed in prison. Maya is the mother of a young child; her former partner, the child's father, was a photojournalist who was killed while reporting on Guinea-Bissau's war of liberation, and Clark shows images from that conflict. (There's an extended scene of the new couple together, in Warmack's bare and neon-bathed rented room, that puts the dialogue-heavy intimacy of a new romantic relationship at the center of the characters' identities and quest.)

“Passing Through” connects music not only to history but also to personal history, in a virtually metaphysical sense, through Warmack’s recollections of his grandfather, Poppa Harris (played by Clarence Muse, then in his late eighties, a Hollywood veteran dating back to the nineteen-twenties), a great musician who was also his teacher and mentor. Warmack, upon his release from prison, seeks first of all to see Poppa, but the elder man is said to have gone off with a woman and has not been seen in a while. In the absence of an in-person reunion, Warmack remembers Poppa, and their shared past returns in visions. Scenes of Warmack’s music lessons with Poppa in childhood are joined to Poppa’s mythological wisdom, his connection of jazz to the soil, his search for the “universal tempo” in tune with nature, and his spirit of freedom, which he also transmits to Warmack as the spirit of resistance and revolt.

The characterizations in “Passing Through” remain narrow, just as the behind-the-scenes drama of plotting action and revenge is kept to a minimum. Clark rends the dramatic surfaces to reveal the underlying essence of jazz as a crucial embodiment of Black experience—and as a crucial form for its transmission, from generation to generation. He reveals himself to be

something of a hedging realist, whose sense of psychological realism is inseparable from his idea of historical and conceptual realism. His drama (he wrote the script with Ted Lange) bears the enormous weight of ideas and experiences that defy ready representation and get converted into stark, hectic symbols. That symbolic intensity finds another historical form in Clark's 1973 featurette, "As Above, So Below" (screening today and Sunday), a harshly realistic political fantasy centered on a young Black man named Jita-Hadi (also played by Nathaniel Taylor), a veteran of the Vietnam War and of counterinsurgencies in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, who is living in Los Angeles as the city is under a state of siege.

A militant group has been carrying out a series of kidnappings, and martial law has been declared—only in predominantly Black neighborhoods—amid plans to imprison millions of Black Americans in detention centers. Amid the city's tension, Jita-Hadi pops into a small coffee shop run by a Black woman (Lyvonne Walder) who expresses boundless optimism in the name of her Christian faith, and where a Black man (Billy Middleton) expresses fulsome gratitude to white people for his modest comforts. There, Jita-Hadi encounters a mysterious woman (Gail Peters) who

takes their meeting for a moment of déjà vu; without giving away too much of the plot, let's just say that Jita-Hadi's visit to the odd little café leads him into the core of the uprising and underpins it with a confident vision of revolutionary secrecy and strategy. Here, too, Clark brings history to the fore. He does it first by showing Jita-Hadi as a child in Chicago, in 1945, as he learns of the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, and then by way of documentary footage of the American military intervention in the Dominican Republic, in 1965. Clark also stages an extraordinary sequence, in a Black storefront church, in which a preacher (Bob Ogburn) delivers an ecstatic sermon of overweening optimism —rising to a fervent call for donations—that's reminiscent of an absolute classic, Oscar Micheaux's silent film "Body and Soul," from 1925, in which Paul Robeson plays a faux preacher of dastardly intent. In "As Above, So Below," Clark spotlights not faith as such but a cheerful gospel of prosperity as a dangerous enemy of political consciousness. Here, too, Clark puts a romantic connection at the center of the struggle; here, too, he composes stark and striking images to fuse that struggle with an aesthetic ideal.