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Connecting Through the Web

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by Alexis Burling, Children's Bookshelf -- *Publishers Weekly*, 11/9/2006

In the world of book publishing, might there be such a thing as kismet? In the case of the creation of *This Jazz Man* (Harcourt, Nov.), a spirited, rhyming picture book that showcases nine celebrated musicians, kismet definitely played a major hand. All it needed was a little push.

The push came, as they often do, in the form of an editor. Samantha McFerrin, editor at Harcourt, came across the idea for the book before she even started acquiring manuscripts. "I'd read *This Jazz Man* years ago in a writing group I belonged to with the author, Karen Ehrhardt. Even back then, I knew it was a very clever idea," she says.

Told to the tune of "This Old Man," the story features nine jazz aficionados as they strut their stuff across each page. Scatting Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, toe-tapping Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and be-bopping Charlie "Bird" Parker are just three of the talents who grace the stage. Even their bios, written by Ehrhardt and included at the end of the book, are lyrical, providing snippets of background information and (in) key facts for interested readers.

After Ehrhardt's manuscript had been acquired, McFerrin's next step was to find an illustrator. But which one? Who might be right for the project? Luckily, McFerrin had a vision of what she wanted the book to look like before she began her search. She was hoping for "an illustrator who could capture each famous musician's likenesses but not be too realistic," she says. "I wanted the illustrations to have movement and imagination. And since the spare text was perfect for younger children, I wanted the artwork to appeal to that age group. So I was looking for vibrant colors, lightheartedness, and an airy composition that offered plenty of room for the art and jazzy type."

With those criteria in mind, McFerrin began her search. Although she and Ehrhardt initially came up with the names of several high-profile artists, many of whom had worked on music-related picture books in the past, she eventually decided she wanted a fresh approach. "In an attempt to dig up every possibility, I decided to type "Jazz Illustration" into Google," she says. "What came up was a link to R.G. Roth's various jazz illustration samples."

But had Roth ever done a picture book like the one she envisioned? "Even though he had illustrated a number of picture books (*Tanuki's Gift*; *Why Butterflies Go by on Silent Wings*), none of them had jazz themes," McFerrin says. Nonetheless, she wanted to give him a shot, saying, "His drawings of the famous musicians [on his Web site] were loose and lively, his palette was vibrant, and his compositions were imaginative and full of movement."

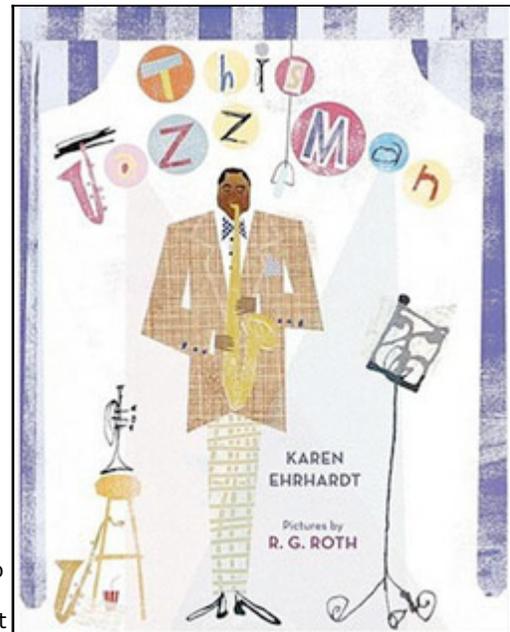
Author Ehrhardt liked McFerrin's suggestion immediately. "When I sent her Rob's samples, she told me she thought he was perfect," McFerrin recalls. "Exactly the style she had in mind."

As for Roth, he was thrilled to be chosen. "In beginning this project," he says, "I did extensive research on each musician. I wanted this book to be a tapestry of various colors, shapes, and textures to complement the sing-along text. To achieve this, I combined mixed media such as printmaking, cut paper, ink and watercolor."

He also threw in a few personal touches—some hidden and some not so hidden—to make the reading experience more interactive. According to McFerrin, "The little mouse on each page and all of the fun details that make the book feel like a mini performance—the curtain that frames the story, the ticket-like book plate, the group bow at the end of the book—were all Roth's brilliant ideas." Roth says he wanted his audience to feel as though they were watching each musician from the front row of a live jam session, rather than from a one-dimensional page of a book.

The book took just under a year for both Ehrhardt and Roth to complete. "Karen was beyond thrilled," McFerrin recalls. "She was impressed that [Roth's] illustrations could communicate such a feeling of improvisation. She thought Rob was a jazz man in his own right."

Roth shared similar sentiments. "Working on *This Jazz Man* was a special project for me. I'm a huge fan of jazz,



especially jazz from the modern era of the '50s and '60s. It was challenging for me to bring each character's individual spirit to life." Challenging, but not insurmountable.

Clearly, when all is said and done, both Roth and Ehrhardt followed Charlie Parker's advice when creating this picture book, each in his and her own medium of expertise: "Master your instrument, master the music, and then forget all that—and just play."

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