With the Beatles

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Louis Armstrong was performing at the Dreamland Cafe, at that moment the absolute centre of the musical universe. The Dictionary, to its credit, makes no such distinctions between provincial and central, or between high and popular art. It is resolutely ecumenical. Donal Henahan, talking about the 1986 edition’s inclusion of popular culture, found it too full of items which would prove ephemeral. But high art can prove just as ephemeral (see the composer Kelley above), and where else but in a reference work like this could one go to learn what all the fuss was about? That’s the useful aspect. The pleasurable aspect is paging through a volume and stopping at things you suddenly realize you need to know more about. To look something up, I had to make a note of it first; otherwise, after being distracted by four or five other entries, I tended to forget what I’d started out looking for.

Not that the dictionary is without flaws. For instance, in the entry on “Drugs”, which could cover the heroin epidemic that ravaged the jazz world in the 1940s and 50s, with consequences including debilitation, prison and death. In fact, a whole sub-entry could be devoted to “Overdose, Death By”. And another to “Hallucinogenics, Music Ruined By”. But that’s being judgmental, which this book resolutely is not. It would also be good to see subject entries on related moments in art and literature, such as “Pop Art” and “Beat Poetry”, but this is already an immense work, and you have to draw a line somewhere.

Residual judgemental elements do surface from time to time. The entry on the composer for “Drugs”, which could cover the heroin epidemic that ravaged the jazz world in the 1940s and 50s, with consequences including debilitation, prison and death. In fact, a whole sub-entry could be devoted to “Overdose, Death By”. And another to “Hallucinogenics, Music Ruined By”. But that’s being judgmental, which this book resolutely is not. It would also be good to see subject entries on related moments in art and literature, such as “Pop Art” and “Beat Poetry”, but this is already an immense work, and you have to draw a line somewhere.

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