

JAZZ MEMOIRS,

PART II

by Steven Nester

FROM THE LATE 1930S until the end of World War Two, after the wild days of New Orleans and Chicago, big bands ruled the earth. Run as businesses and with ties to publishing houses and recording companies, many delivered to consumers a musical product. Of course, the musicianship, songwriting and leeway given to soloists and the general ability to “swing” differed from band to band. While many conceive of big bands as lumbering behemoths playing bland dance music, many of them—for example, Duke Ellington’s band—were units that eschewed conformity and stressed the individual styles of their players. And no one could call Ellington’s compositions conformist or dull. Some big bands have endured to this day with their progenitors long gone, including those of Count Basie, Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington.

By the 1940s, many musicians with new ideas viewed the prevailing Swing and big band music as too predictable and clichéd. These musicians felt unchallenged by the standard jazz repertoire and techniques of Dixieland and big band music. What happened next in music was bebop.

Simply put, bebop is a style of music wherein melodies or musical phrases don’t necessarily stop at the end of a bar; the drumming is more sinuous than timekeeping; and solos are based on the chord progression of the song rather than the melody. The piano moved from a rhythmic instrument to one that played melodic fills, and the bass became the timekeeper.

Some of the finest American music came out of the bebop revolution, and some of the best jazz memoirs came from bebop players. But big bands played on in various forms, and their greatest players—like Lionel Hampton and Buck Clayton—kept the

creative tradition alive while not compromising their musical integrity.

BORN TO GOOD-TIMING PARENTS in 1919, vocalist Anita O’Day led a life that was the stuff of Depression-era melodrama. Had her story been put on the big screen, her Hollywood doppelganger could have been Barbara Stanwyck—in fact, there’s a physical resemblance that is difficult to miss. Picture

Stanwyck in one of her roles as a tough doll with a tough life. Picture her leaning against a bus stop sign with a suitcase at her feet. An unlit cigarette dangles from a pout as she waits for a break—any break—to swing by and give her the once-over. Now throw in heroin addiction, drug busts, abortions, jail time, broken hearts and enough talent to land her a job at age 22 as the canary in Gene Krupa’s band. Now there’s a story, and it’s called *High Times, Hard Times* (with George Eels; Putnam, 1981), by Anita O’Day.

Sent from Chicago to Kansas City every summer to live with her grandparents, Anita learned to sing in church. When her itinerant father bought a piano with the proceeds won on a horse named Anita, there was music and temporary security at home. But bearing the guilt of an unloved child born out of wedlock, Anita knew she was unwanted, just “excess baggage.” She spent her early teens winning Lindy Hop competitions and smoking reefer. At age 14, she

decided to run away to live with her grandmother. Returned to Chicago by an uncle, she left school and, with her mother’s blessings, began the life of a professional walkathon contestant—a dubious profession where many big show business names, including Red Skelton, June Havoc and Lord Buckley, got their starts. Not only did Anita learn important lessons about



depravity, human nature and the racket that was the walkathon business, she also learned about singing and how to carry herself onstage.

After plodding through the Midwest, she returned to Chicago only to be nabbed by her truant officer, who hauled her back to school. This was no big deal for Anita; she just sneaked out at night and found employment as a taxi dancer. After working her way up through the bars and nightclubs of Chicago's Loop, she began making a name for herself as a singer, gaining favor with the players as well as the fans. She sang with the likes of Wingy Manone and auditioned for Benny Goodman. She walked out of the Goodman audition when he complained she didn't sing the melody. O'Day wasn't a note-for-note big band girl singer; she was a song stylist, a singer who put her musical imprimatur on a song.

She found it tough being a proto-bop stylist in a big band world. As far as her style was concerned, O'Day said she owed it all to Louis Armstrong, whose singing on vinyl had accompanied her lovemaking with an old paramour. She found her first musical partners in bandleader and drummer Gene Krupa and trumpeter Roy "Little Jazz" Eldridge. In fact, with Eldridge blowing and O'Day singing, Krupa had his first hit with "Let Me Off Uptown." For a while, Anita O'Day was living high with the Krupa band.

During World War Two, the big band business was nonstop touring in unstable conditions. Ceaseless travel and little sleep, booze, pills, pot and poker combined in a grind that could wear down anyone. Sometimes the bus couldn't move because of gas or rubber shortages. Travel had to be improvised, as when the band shared a train car with two cows. When bus and train travel became impractical, Krupa's manager wrangled some gigs at military bases. That way, transportation would be provided by a military DC-3.

The band thought they had it beat. But on a flight to a gig in San Francisco, the ashen-faced pilot told them they were in trouble and should put on their parachutes. O'Day scooped up a poker pot and stuffed it into her bra. Krupa picked up the nearest whiskey bottle and poured it down his throat. Everyone scrambled to put on a parachute. Their aircraft landed safely, but the plane carrying their instruments had to turn back, leaving them a band with no instruments, but most definitely with a song in their

hearts. O'Day left Krupa in the mid-1940s to join Stan Kenton, and lightning struck when she delivered his first hit, "And Her Tears Flowed like Wine."

The 1950s and 1960s were tough for O'Day, though she recorded more than 10 albums and played countless dates. The problems turned out to be personal. She had been busted for pot before, but when pianist and singer Harry "The Hipster" Gibson turned her on to heroin backstage at a Los Angeles nightclub in 1953, it changed her life. The next 14 years would find Anita O'Day scrambling to supply her habit, duck the law from coast to coast, and function on the most basic level, all the while trying to refine and perfect her craft.

There were good times as well. When a surprise saxophone solo played behind her during a performance, she turned around to find the musician gone. It was Charlie Parker, sitting in very briefly. Later, when they played a gig together, Parker paid her the ultimate compliment: "You come from the same branch of the tree as I do when it comes to time." After the gig, Parker took her to his connection to score. He also planned an album with O'Day that was okayed by Verve Records' Norman Granz. The dreams of junkies, though, are short-lived; Parker died within the year. After an overdose in a Los Angeles bathroom in the mid-1960s, O'Day straightened out. She continues to perform to this day.

High Times, Hard Times is a book that shows the struggles of performers who managed to break free of the conformity of big bands and express themselves in their own ways. In the case of O'Day, it's even more poignant because female vocalists, "canaries" or "girl singers," were often considered fluff rather than artists.



before he forgot the books and, at age 16, he quit school and picked up the C melody saxophone in earnest.

Barnet was leading integrated groups by the middle 1930s and had a hit record with "Cherokee," which became a big band standard. One of the interesting things about big band memoirs is the ever-changing lineup of musicians. In this band format it seems inherent that musicians come and go, and Barnet has stories about plenty of them. In fact, *Those Swinging Years* is one recounting after another, and the characters just keep coming, even when you think Barnet must be tapped out. There's Lena Horn and Fats Waller. There's Malcolm X the shoeshine boy, who paid Barnet a compliment 20 years before he took up radical politics. And there's an especially stomach-churning practical joke played on Desi Arnaz, brought on by his incessant wailing of "Babalu." Barnet's life seems at times to have been one long frat party.

The travails in this memoir are of the temporal variety: lack of quality musicians during World War Two, dealing with drunken musicians, Byzantine union rules, and the many complications brought on by too much drinking and too much womanizing.

Barnet is blithe and nonchalant, even though his integrated group caused some concern with some audiences and hotel clerks. To get his singer Lena Horne into a hotel he passed her off as Cuban. They babbled to each other in gibberish, hoping to fool the desk clerk into thinking they spoke Spanish. Barnet wasn't a barrier breaker by design. His reason for hiring blacks during the Thirties and Forties was simple: He wanted the best musicians he could find.

DUKE ELLINGTON was without peer in the world of jazz. Composer, arranger, bandleader, pianist and musical diplomat, there seemed to be virtually nothing he couldn't do. And if one is to believe his memoir *Music is My Mistress* (Doubleday, 1973), he never met a man he didn't like, including the gangsters who employed him at the beginning of his career. Ellington's book is generous, complimentary and uncontroversial. It's no wonder he was such a beloved and respected figure and that, later in his career, he toured the globe as an ambassador of goodwill and jazz. Although informative, *Music is My*

Mistress suffers sometimes from too much cheerfulness. Still, there are nuggets of significant insight to be found in its pages.

Ellington was born in 1899 in Washington, D.C. into a solid middle-class African-American family. His father was a butler who taught his son how to comport himself properly in company and made sure his social education would hold him in good stead anywhere. After her son was hit in the head with a baseball bat, Duke's mother decided that music should be his career choice. So Duke was signed up to take piano lessons from a lady with the less-than-confidence-inspiring name of Miss Clinkscates.

Ellington's stable upbringing produced a well-adjusted young man who learned to savor and make use of every experience that came his way. At the turn of the century, the nation's capitol seemed to have a small-town flavor. Ellington had childhood memories of President Theodore Roosevelt riding his horse unaccompanied through Ellington's neighborhood and pausing to watch Ellington and his pals play baseball. With a wave he would move on, and the boys would halt their game a moment to wave back.

Ellington began his career in vaudeville, playing in theaters and saloons around the D.C. area. He was honored one night to have saxophone great Coleman Hawkins and legendary bandleader Fletcher Henderson (who later became Benny Goodman's arranger) come visit the dive where he was playing. However, the showcase was interrupted by gunplay. Such were the hazards of small jazz venues in the days of mobster-run clubs.

In the early, insular world of black entertainers, Ellington met just about everyone. After being introduced in a club to Willie "The Lion" Smith, Ellington was invited by the master to sit down play a few tunes, only to have Smith return from a break and "crush him." Fellow stride pianist James P. Johnson was kinder, allowing the young Ellington to come up on stage and play during a Washington, D.C. concert. Johnson applauded the hometown favorite's ability and the two became friends. The "au naturel" style of New Orleans reedman Sidney Bechet turned Ellington's head around in 1921 cutting sessions, opening Ellington up to the rawness and primitive power of early jazz.

Ellington eventually formed a band and stormed New



York, where they became the house band at the legendary Cotton Club. According to *Music is My Mistress*, when the occasional homicide detective came around the mob-owned club to ask questions, Duke played dumb. Fifty years after the fact, the discreet and gentlemanly Ellington still refuses to dish. Yet there is one gangster story he tells with a bit of pride. Once in Chicago, he was shaken down by a bunch of two-bit hoods. Al Capone got wind of this and delivered a fiat: No one was to touch Duke Ellington when he was in Chicago.

Ellington spent his life composing, traveling and performing. His preferred method of travel was to be chauffeured by baritone sax player Harry Carney. He spent many days and many nights on the road that way, writing music, sleeping and, by his own account, always dreaming.

BORN IN RED BANK, NEW JERSEY in 1904, William "Count" Basie was the son of a coachman to a wealthy New Jersey family. Like Duke Ellington, Basie had a stable childhood. And like Ellington's, it was full of learning of how the other (white) half lived. As a kid, Basie cleaned up the Palace Theater in Red Bank. One afternoon when the piano accompanist couldn't make it from New York, a disbelieving owner humored Basie and let him fill in. The pro from New York was out, and Basie was in. Soon enough, Basie was playing in New York's Harlem, learning from Fats Waller and other stride players, and from there traveling the theater circuit.

Basie came into his own in Kansas City, Missouri in the late 1920s. The city was the regional hub of jazz, a mob town run by Mayor "Big Bill" Pendergast, and home base to what were known as territory bands. Kansas City was a good place for a jazz musician to become stranded. There was music everywhere, and bands and musicians came and went in a constant stream, meaning there were always prospects for employment. It was there that Basie got his first big break, joining the legendary Blue Devils and then another famous territory outfit, the Bennie Moten Band. Basie was a natural bandleader: when the musicians voted Moten out, the remaining members formed the

nucleus of what became the first Count Basie Orchestra. It wasn't long before renowned record producer, writer and talent scout John Hammond noticed them.

Good Morning Blues ("as told to" Albert Murray; Random House, 1986) is an affable recounting of what Basie played, who he played it with, and where. He gives a thorough description of his contemporaries and of their efforts to define a new musical style, and how over the years small bands begat swing, big band, bop and beyond.

CABELL "CAB" CALLOWAY may be familiar to the average consumer of jazz as the guy in tails and a conk who sings the novelty number "Minnie the Moocher" with its unmistakable "hi-di-hi-di-hi" refrain. He also wrote the entertaining *Of Minnie the Moocher & Me* (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976). A hard-working hustler born in Rochester, New York in 1907, he gave notice early on that academics were not for him. Calloway's lawyer father and teacher mother

could do little to keep their pony-playing teenage son in school. He preferred selling papers and shining shoes, then taking what he'd earned to the track, to fulfilling his parents' dream that he attend law school. When teachers sitting in the audience caught the underage Cab singing in clubs around town, he would have to show up for class the next day to ensure their silence.

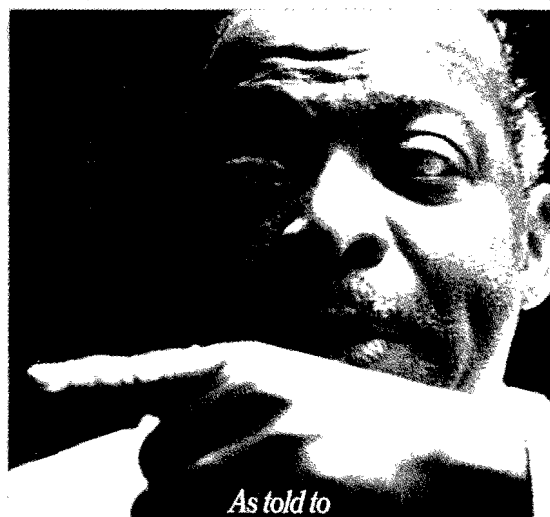
When he hit Chicago in 1926, the city was at its height of jazz activity. His older sister Blanche got him an audition in the "Plantation Days" review on the condition he attend college. Cab got the part and there was no looking back. It wasn't long before Cab hit the big time. In 1930 his band

was playing in New York when he was approached by a couple of tough characters, obviously gangsters. They represented the Cotton Club and came with an offer. Starting the next day, Calloway's group became the

Good Morning Blues

The Autobiography of

COUNT BASIE



As told to

Albert Murray

Cotton Club house band, replacing the touring Duke Ellington.

Cab was lucky enough to get into the business when jazz and popular entertainment were still intertwined. He was the perfect front man. He could engage the audience by making an emotional connection, as well as by using some good old-fashioned show biz razzmatazz. Cab could sing, Cab could emote, and Cab could lead a band.

Like others before and after him, Calloway found touring the South a major ordeal. He saw no little irony that black jazz musicians were spat upon in the land where jazz was invented. But there was often plenty of dissension right on the bandstand. One famous story involving Cab Calloway and a young Dizzy Gillespie gets a very different retelling in their respective autobiographies. In the 1940s, the Calloway band played a date at the State Theater in Hartford, Connecticut. When Cab is repeatedly hit with spitballs during the show, he blames Gillespie. Dizzy denies it and is fired. As far as Cab is concerned, end of story. In his own excellent memoir, *To Be or Not... to Bop* (Doubleday, 1979), Gillespie tells the story differently. There is a confrontation, Dizzy pulls out a knife, and Calloway is stabbed in the *avoir du pois*. (The memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and other jazz legends are highly recommended but have been omitted here; their lives and achievements have received abundant coverage and even the most casual fan is familiar with some aspect of their accomplishments.)

TAKE PITY ON ANY SAXOPHONE PLAYER who aspired to the heights of expression and genius that Charlie Parker attained. Many have tried—

able to carry on and become the finest alto saxophonist of his time is a tale of the triumph of will and ambition against odds and obstacles that

and, without exaggeration, many have died trying. There is no heir to the house that Parker built, no number one son, no favorite upon whom can be conferred the mantle or, perhaps, the onus of the Parker legacy. There are only the other saxophonists who play in the bebop idiom. They are esteemed for their own style of perfection, but some are forever damned by comparison to Parker. Life can be unfair, even to the extremely talented. Art Pepper is one such musician.

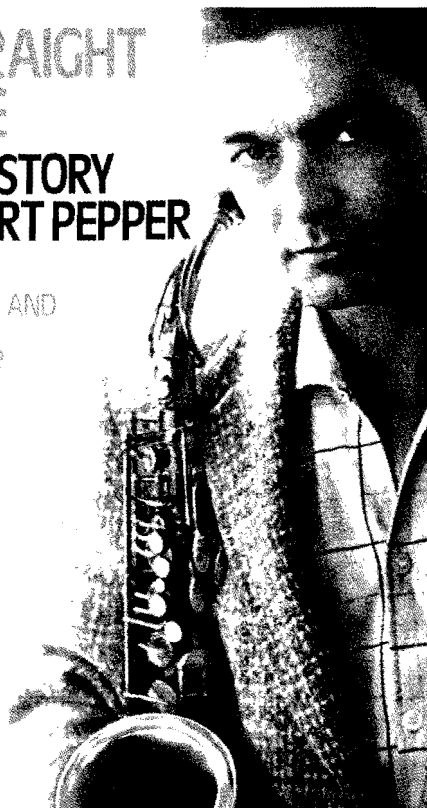
Born in sunny Southern California in 1925 to parents who had no business getting married, Art Pepper was aware early in his life that he would serve two masters: jazz and heroin addiction. His non-stop drug use—especially in the 1940s and 1950s—kept him in and out of jail for two decades. Yet he was one of jazz's more prolific recording artists. Pepper's autobiography, *Straight Life* (with Laurie Pepper; Schirmer, 1979), is a rare combination of honesty, insight and engaging storytelling, making it one of the best accounts of the jazz life and addiction ever written. A confession and a catharsis, *Straight Life* is the story of a complex man who cannot stop communicating by one means or another.

Pepper lays it all out in simple but elegant prose. There is raw emotion, frank talk of how he made ends meet as a junkie and a criminal, his encounters with racism from black musicians, his intense sexuality, the horror and humanity of his years at San Quentin, and the finer points of drug addiction. How he was



STRAIGHT LIFE THE STORY OF ART PEPPER

BY ART AND
LAURIE
PEPPER



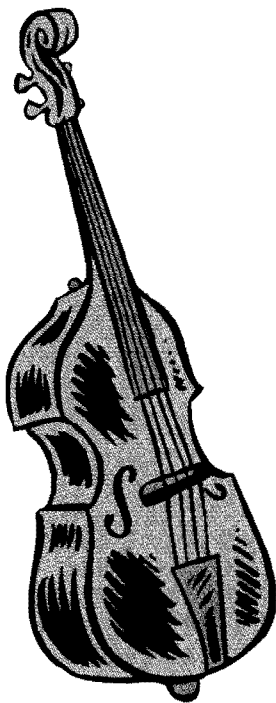
buried many of his contemporaries.

As a young man playing around Los Angeles' black Central Avenue, a hub of clubs and jazz activity, Pepper got his first break when he joined the Benny Carter band and later Stan Kenton's. After a hitch in the Army, he was free to devote his life to playing his horn and getting high. And that's what he did. He scrambled for gigs and recording dates and to feed his drug habit, and survived for years in one of America's most infamous prisons. There are so many stories in *Straight Life*, both happy and tragic, and they are so tightly written into the narrative, that plucking them out for a synopsis would seem to cheat the book.

Art Pepper was a romantic artist—a guy in search of a higher ideal that could only be defined by improvised music. This book is a modern adventure about a man in pursuit of a muse too young to have a name. Pepper's greatest attributes were his honesty and integrity. He knew he could never change and that he would be a junkie and a creative artist to the day he died. *Straight Life* is the story of a man who made peace with the horror of his life by creating art, and it is a high point of documentation of the jazz life.

CHARLES MINGUS NEVER did anything the easy way. He was a man of contradictions, and his jazz style had one foot planted firmly in New Orleans while the other took a giant step into the unknown. A brawler, a satyr, composer, bassist, impresario, record label owner, a rule breaker: Mingus was a musician who couldn't wait for others to keep up. His memoir, *Beneath the Underdog* (Nel King, editor; Knopf, 1971), is an expressionistic *bildungsroman*, what eminent jazz writer and critic Gary Giddins called a "psychological profile," a self-portrait of the artist as a young and impatient iconoclast.

Born in 1922 in Nogales, Arizona and raised in the black neighborhood of Los



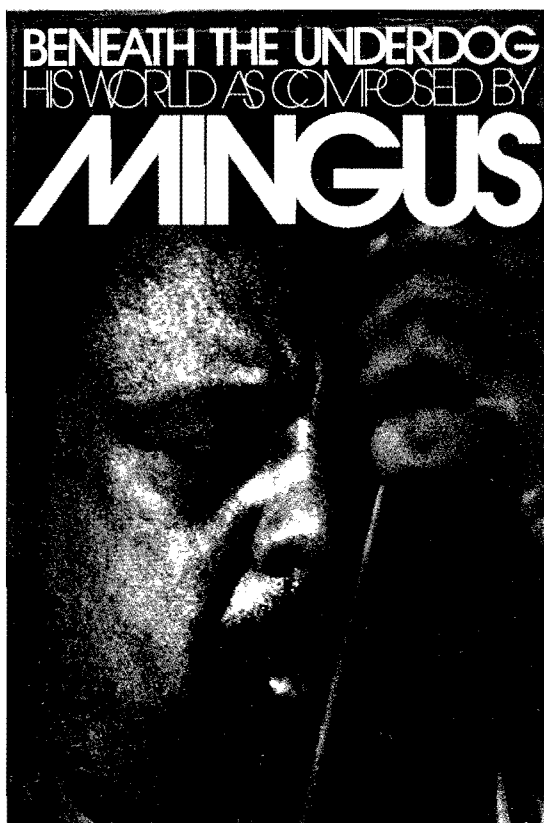
Angeles known as Watts, Mingus was a prodigy who claimed to have learned bass by playing along with the radio, although he counted the renowned Red Callendar as one of his teachers. At the age of 20 he played with New Orleans greats Kid Ory, Barney Bigard, Louis Armstrong and Lionel Hampton, all within a year's time. Legendary for his intolerance of racism and poor musicianship, as well as his unbridled need to heed his own muse no matter when or where, Mingus had a reputation of being difficult to work with and for. He berated those he thought were not playing up to the demands of his music, and even physically assaulted offending members of his band. Mingus also had the dubious honor of being the only musician personally fired by Duke Ellington. Ever the diplomat, Ellington fails to mention this in his memoir, although he does discuss calming down a mutinous Mingus and talking him into returning to a recording session.

In *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus gives his demons names and faces, and places them squarely on center stage. He conjures up doomed bebop trumpeter Fats Navarro, and fleshes out pimps, prostitutes, hustlers and a veritable harem. With this cast, Mingus gives life to the turning points, important

moments, and epiphanies of his life. He plays out issues of sexual politics, race and racism, and the agony of the artist living in a world he sees as pitted against him.

"I dig minds, inside and out," Mingus says, "No race, no color, no sex. Don't show me no kind of skin 'cause I can see right through to the hate in your little undeveloped souls." *Beneath the Underdog* is a stroll through an interior landscape as decorated by Hieronymous Bosch and narrated by Henry Miller and William S. Burroughs. And just when you think this is the apogee of jazz memoirs, you find out there is more.

Raise Up Off Me by pianist Hampton Hawes (and Don Asher; Coward, McCann &

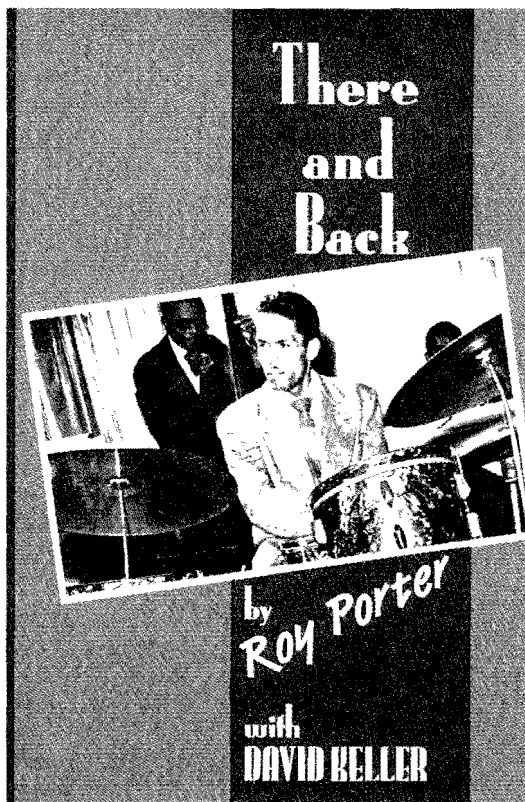


Geoghegan, 1974) is among the finest jazz memoirs written. Hawes was born with six fingers on each hand, but that didn't make him a better piano player; he wasted 20 years maintaining a drug habit, but that didn't make him another casualty of hipness. The extra fingers—tiny appendages really—were severed when he was born; and the heroin addiction, shed after many painful years, didn't completely rob him of his destiny as one of bebop's most talented players. Jazz or no jazz, Hampton Hawes just wanted to be treated like a man.

Born to a preacher in 1928 in Los Angeles, Hawes grew up in a loving and hardworking family. Jazz musicians were looked down upon—as they often were anywhere during this period—so Hawes had to sneak onto the family keyboard to play his beloved boogie-woogie. Eventually Hawes began to make the Central Avenue scene and played with bebop pioneer Charlie Parker and other early boppers such as Wardell Gray. He was on his way to the big time. But Hampton Hawes was also a patriot. He was such a believer in America that he put his brilliant career on hold in the early 1950s to answer Uncle Sam's call to serve in the military, in spite of the fact that his heroin addiction could have earned him a deferment.

During his military service in post-World War Two Japan, Hawes found acceptance as a musician and a human being. Instead of coming across as a materialistic, overbearing conqueror, Hawes was more of a goodwill ambassador, showing a seriously flawed but very human face to the Japanese who befriended him, appreciated his music and supplied him with dope. Hawes eventually went AWOL and spent time in the stockade. Back in America, it wasn't long before he was busted and handed a 10-year sentence in federal prison. After five years, President John F. Kennedy gave him a presidential pardon. Hawes made up for lost time, keeping busy with tours and recording dates.

Throughout his narrative, Hawes uses the piano as a metaphor for life. "A keyboard is more consistent than life, it gives you back what you



put into it, no more, no less." He constantly refers to the piano, imbuing it with metaphorical value. Like a novelist, Hawes drops cultural references into his story to give a sense of time and place of what could be described as a mainstream childhood in America: comics, listening to the radio, movies and football. Hawes sees himself as the quintessential (though extremely talented) American. He wants to be accepted for who he is—an honest, taxpaying American—but Jim Crow tells him otherwise.

Like Art Pepper's *Straight Life*, Hawes' *Raise Up Off Me* is a book about addiction; and like Charles Mingus' *Beneath the Underdog*, it is a book about race relations in America.

Hawes found critical and

some monetary success but, like Mingus, he could not find inclusion. And if bebop—a music that turned off such pioneers as Louis Armstrong—set Hawes and his contemporaries apart from much of everyday America, there was also the jazzman's other fulltime concern: hustling to support a heroin habit, on the fringes of an inner-city black community.

DRUMMER ROY PORTER was born in 1923, the son of a Colorado coal miner. What jazz there was to be found in the Centennial State in the mid-1930s was heard in Denver and Pueblo, and to get there from Colorado Springs where he spent his youth, Porter and his pals rode the rails. Porter told his story in the 1991 memoir *There and Back* (with David Keller; L.S.U. Press).

Porter began his percussion career banging on the bottom of a Crisco can. He soon took over drumming responsibilities for the McDonald Family Band in Colorado Springs. He reached a decision about his future one night in Pueblo, when the drummer with Earl Hines' band let him do a solo during an intermission. The audience cheered for the local boy, but he knew the musicians saw him as an amateur. To get out of Colorado to where the action was, Porter knew he had to get busy on the skins—and he did.



Soon enough, he was touring with groundbreaking guitarist T-Bone Walker. After his discharge from the Army in 1944, Porter went to Los Angeles. He worked as a gardener during the day, and played around Central Avenue clubs at night before joining the band of pioneer bebop trumpeter Howard McGhee. Through McGhee, Porter got a gig as drummer for the 1946 sessions Charlie Parker recorded for Dial Records, securing his place in jazz history.

Unfortunately, it was downhill from there. The Central Avenue scene had moved on; drugs and alcohol landed him in jail. Somewhere along the way, though, he was able to learn some music theory. What is interesting about *There and Back* is that it gives a glimpse into the aftermath of the bebop movement, when cool jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll—along with television—took over the entertainment world, scattering musicians over a wide cultural landscape.

Porter had too much technique for cool jazz, which he called “white man’s jazz”; nor did he have any use for rock and roll. And as for television, he had a chance there but blew it. His scheduled debut on the popular *Milton Berle Show* never happened. Before airtime, Porter stopped in a bar for a drink, and didn’t awaken from the ensuing alcoholic blackout until four days later. As a result, Porter giggered around and wasted much time financing his substance abuse habits. Fortunately, he hooked up with rhythm and blues king Louis Jordan and played on the growing Las Vegas Strip as it evolved into a major venue.

Roy Porter was on hand at bebop’s earliest moments, and played music that was created the instant before the sound left the horn. That’s pretty much how he lived his life, making it up as he went along.

AS A BOY, Lionel Hampton equated holiness with banging on the drums. Hampton was born into a family of Holy Rollers, and during church services the parishioner beating the bass

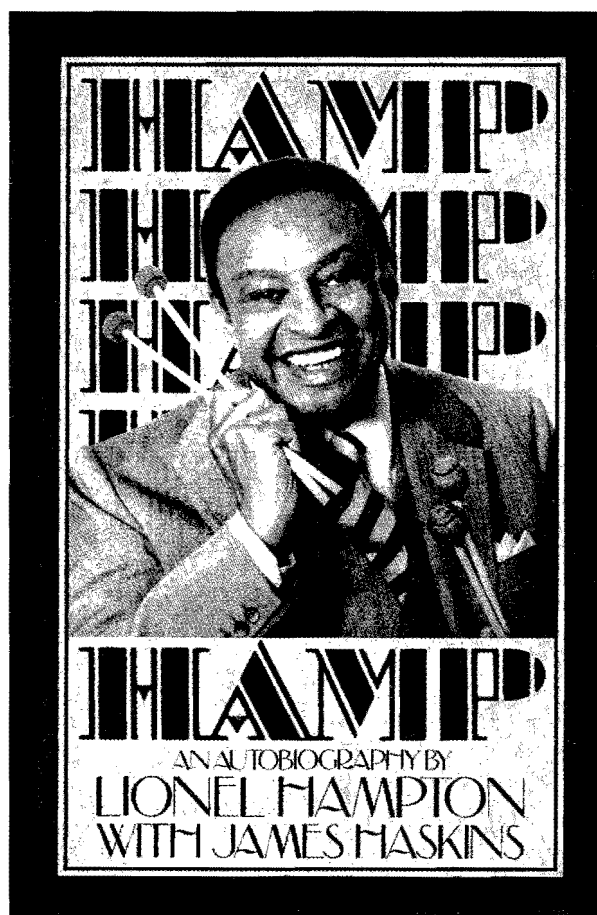
drum often was “grabbed” by the Holy Spirit and began to dance. “Seemed to me that drumming was the best way to get close to God,” said Hampton in his memoir, *Hamp* (with James Haskins; Warner Books, 1989). But when he wasn’t getting closer to God, one of jazz’s first vibraphonists led an interesting life that took him from Birmingham, Alabama, all the way to the upper echelons of African-American society and even to the White House. Lionel Hampton was a rock-solid Republican in a business full of free-living anarchists.

Hampton was born in 1908. His father enlisted for service in World War One and was among the war’s missing for 20 years, until he was discovered in a Veterans hospital, incapacitated by German mustard gas. In the meantime, Lionel’s Uncle Richard took the family to Chicago, where his skills as a bootlegger made him a prized employee of Al Capone and brought prosperity to the family. Uncle Richard was a jazz fan who introduced young Lionel to many musicians. Incidentally, Richard also happened to be the driver of the car in which the great blues singer Bessie Smith died after an accident on a dark country road in Mississippi.

It wasn’t until 1930, in a recording studio with Louis Armstrong, that Hampton encountered the vibraphone, an instrument then only 10 years old. Armstrong asked Hampton to play behind him on a tune, making Hampton the first jazz musician to record on the instrument.

Hampton’s first triumph was playing in the Benny Goodman Quartet in the late 1930s. In 1940, Hampton, with much help from his wife Gladys, struck out on his own and formed the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. The band worked until Hampton’s death in 2002.

Hamp is an enjoyable book that recounts the details of running a big band from the 1940s to the 1980s. During the constant comings and goings of employees in a large organization, Hampton meets everyone. He takes credit for teaching Sammy Davis Jr. to play the drums, as well as urging the young entertainer to sing.



Hampton kept his nose clean, invested wisely and became a solid upper-middle-class citizen who performed at the White House for Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon. He devoted time to Republican Party fundraising, Civil Rights and personal high finance. Lionel Hampton was one jazz musician who understood that making music was all about personal expression, but that one didn't necessarily have to suffer for one's art.

GEORGE SYLVESTER "RED" CALLENDER was a bassist and tuba player, and had more than enough backbone to support any type of band or music. Throughout his career, Callender played symphonies, club dates, revues and television, and was enough his own man and musician to turn down offers from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.

Born in 1916 and raised in New Jersey, Callendar began his musical career at a private school outside Atlantic City, New Jersey, which in the 1920s and 1930s had a thriving nightlife. A precocious youngster, Callender landed an introduction to the great composer W.C. Handy, hoping to get a job as a musical copyist. His dreams were dashed when Handy admitted that his business office was just a front to get him out of the house. "Son," Handy admitted, "I've been living off 'St. Louis Blues' for the past 20 years." Not to worry: Red found a job playing tuba in an Elks Club band.

A musician who pledged allegiance to nothing but the gig at hand, Callender recorded and played with everyone from Charlie Parker to Nat Cole to Charles Mingus who, as a 17-year-old savant, banged on Callender's door and begged him for bass lessons. In his book *Unfinished Dream: The*



Musical World of Red Callender (with Elaine Cohen; Quartet Books, 1985), Callender includes portraits of people, places and sounds in the music scene from Los Angeles to New York and the great expanse in between. *Unfinished Dream* reads well, and Callender is at his best when describing the musical scene around Los Angeles' Central Avenue, the evolution of jazz, and which musicians influenced others.

WILLIAM OSCAR SMITH was a much-sought-after sideman, but what he really wanted to do was

teach. Born in 1917 in Georgia and reared in Philadelphia, Smith penned a fascinating memoir, *Sideman* (Rutledge Hill, 1991).

Strictly a musician for hire, he was happy to play wherever he was called, as long as he could make it to N.Y.U. the next day to attend his music classes. He tells of Nat "King" Cole's habit of finishing his set and then waiting for Smith to finish his at four a.m. Cole would make sure Smith got back up to Harlem in time to get some sleep in preparation for a day in class.

A proficient bassist and avowed swing stylist, Smith played with a pre-bop Dizzy Gillespie, but worried that touring with tenor sax great Coleman Hawkins would disrupt his studies. To ensure some stability, he accepted the position of house bassist at Kelly's Stables, a legendary nightclub on 52nd Street in Manhattan.

Although he was participated in recording sessions with Dizzy Gillespie, Smith recalls that bop drummer Max Roach would cringe when he saw Smith enter the studio with his bass. Smith didn't take it personally; Roach was only

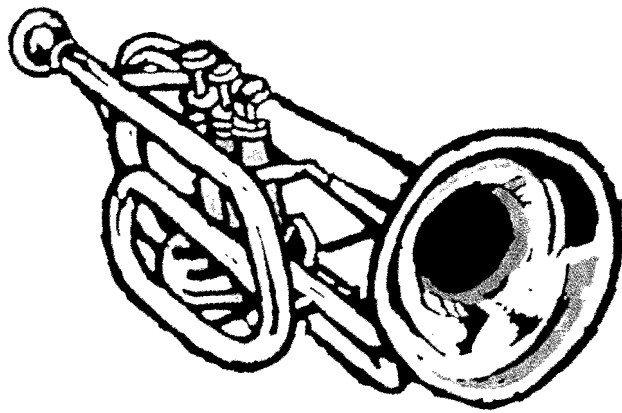
SIDEMAN



THE LONG GIG OF W.O. SMITH

A MEMOIR

With an Introduction by Dizzy Gillespie



commenting on his pre-bop style of playing. Smith realized his own limitations in motivation and style meant he'd never become famous as a bassist, and chose instead to become an educator at the college level.

BORN IN PARSONS, KANSAS IN 1911, Wilbur Clayton was named after pioneer aviator Wilbur Wright. It was the hope of his preacher father and schoolteacher mother that the name Wilbur would not degenerate into a silly nickname, a wish that was only partly granted. His eventual nickname wasn't a variation on Wilbur: it was Buck.

As a youth, Clayton learned to play the trumpet. He also discovered that, on the Great Plains, jazz could be a dangerous vocation. While lingering outside a window to listen to a radio, he was mistaken for a prowler and arrested. At age 17, he and a pal decided to ride the rails to Los Angeles, where they imagined fame and fortune awaited. Neophyte hobos, they hopped aboard the wrong train and ended up in Texas. There, they were hauled off the train, accused of raping a white woman and kidnapped. After being terrorized, they were run out of town, counting themselves lucky to be alive.

Buck finally did make it to L.A., where he gigged around, ran a pool hall, and became active in the Central Avenue music scene as well as getting movie work as a musician. He was turned down as an extra in the movie *King Kong* because he was too dark, but got a private music lesson from Louis Armstrong, who also gave him his first taste of marijuana. (Buck's recounting of the ensuing fit of paranoia is hilarious.) After returning home from two years of playing in Shanghai, Clayton spent the 1930s and 1940s as a soloist with the Count Basie Band.

His memoir, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World* (Oxford

University Press, 1987), is long on names and dates and meticulous in the nuts and bolts of how and why a band was put together, and the roles talent and stylistic compatibility played in its success.

JOHN HENRY HAMMOND possessed a clear and uncomplicated writing style, produced by the best American schooling money could buy. Born in a Manhattan mansion in 1910, Hammond became a journalist, record and concert producer, talent scout and all-around musical ombudsman. With a keen and discriminating eye and a taste for the new music, Hammond combed the clubs of Harlem and the rathskellars of Greenwich Village in search of the best and most original jazz musicians he could find. Money was no object to Hammond; his great-great-grandfather was Cornelius Vanderbilt, one of the first American industrialists who formed the new American aristocracy.

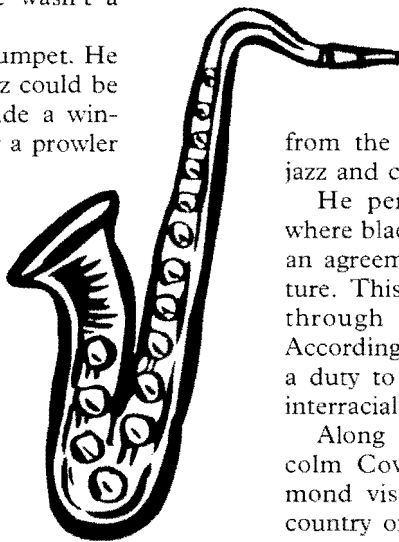
In his memoir, *John Hammond On Record* (with Irving Townsend; Summit Books, 1977), he dispels the myth of the wealthy neophyte slumming uptown, looking for kicks on the other side of the color line. From the beginning, Hammond was an avowed liberal. From the 1920s to the 1980s, Hammond was a music business insider. He began writing for English jazz magazines and, in 1932, produced his first recording session.

He didn't so much rebel against the social class he was born into as disassociate himself from it. He dropped out of Yale, moved to the Village, removed his name from the *Social Register*, and championed jazz and civil rights.

He perceived jazz as the perfect place where blacks and whites could meet, come to an agreement, and forge a new social structure. This may be as close to social change through music that one may ever get. According to Hammond, "...jazz always has a duty to promote racial understanding and interracial cooperation."

Along with noted activists such as Malcolm Cowley and Edmund Wilson, Hammond visited the beleaguered coal mining country of Harlan County, Kentucky, where unions and mine owners battled over profits and men's lives. Soon after that, he was in Alabama, working on behalf the Scottsboro Boys. His biggest contributions to race and culture, though, were in jazz.

In 1935, while helping assemble a band for Benny Goodman, he brought in black piano player Teddy Wilson, engineering the first integrated jazz band. Hammond's liberal politics run throughout the book without dragging down the many anecdotes of mixing and matching musicians in order to reach stylistic



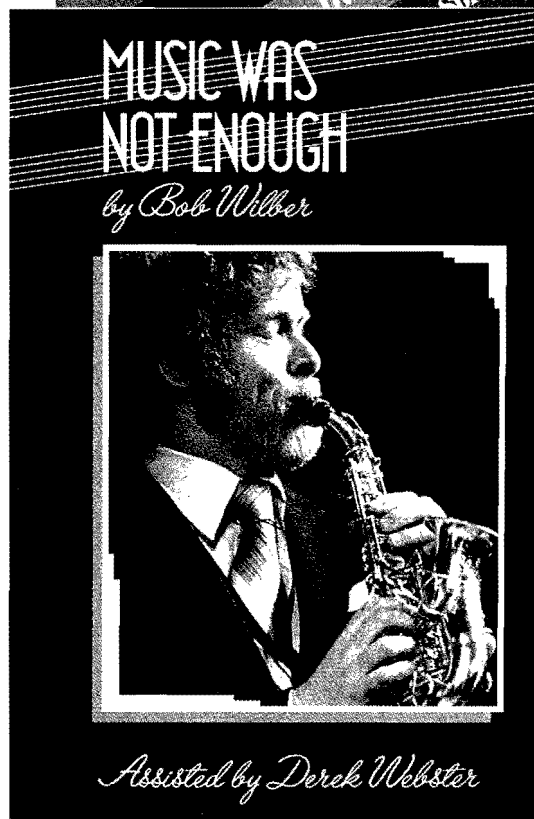
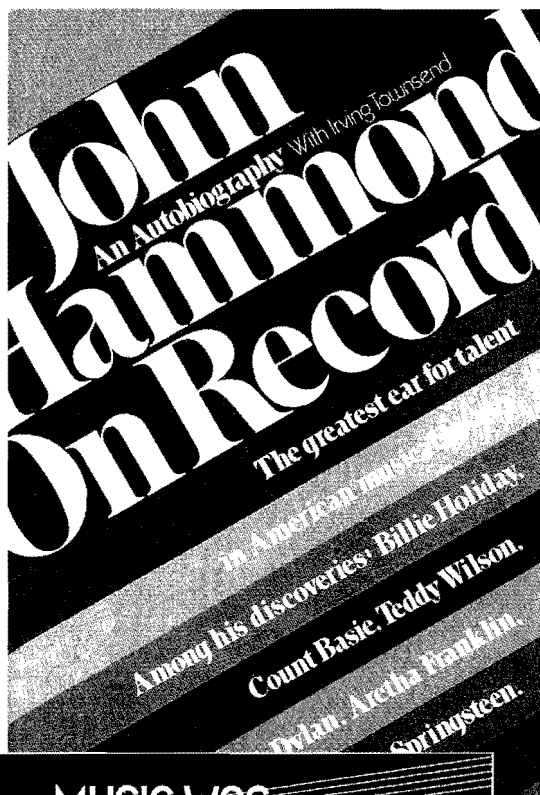
simpatico on the bandstand. As a talent scout, Hammond was virtually without peer. From Billie Holiday to Count Basie, Charlie Christian right on up to Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin and Bruce Springsteen, Hammond understood how to identify a diamond in the rough, then polish and refine it.

Never in it for the money (he was, after all, loaded), never playing the angles and always looking out for the little guy, John Hammond's understanding of how to merge art and social change was unique.

BORN IN 1928, reed man Bob Wilber was the perfect age to be a member of the bebop generation, but his heart belonged to Louis Armstrong and Sydney Bechet. During his youth, while the world was in the midst of a bebop revolution, Wilber was right in the middle of the Dixieland revival that took place in the postwar years. To his friends, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker were gods; to Wilber, the New Orleans pioneers and their coevals in Chicago were the cat's pajamas.

A son of wealth with plenty of talent, as a young man Wilber moved in with Sydney Bechet, who became his mentor. In fact, Wilber became so identified as Bechet's protégé that it caused him to have an identity crisis. A very thoughtful man, Wilber recounts his struggle as a square peg in search of his place in the jazz world in his excellent memoir, *Music Was Not Enough* ("assisted by" Derek Webster; The Macmillan Press, 1987).

As a kid, Wilber formed a "Hot Club," or New Orleans jazz appreciation society with some pals. He quit the Eastman School of Music to gig around New York City. When he moved into



Bechet's Brooklyn house, things started to pop for the mild-mannered (and somewhat repressed) young man. He and Bechet serenaded a naked Tallulah Bankhead and her lover. When Bechet's drunken mistress seduced Wilber one night, the guilt-ridden and ambivalent youth feared for his life at the hands of his violent and hotheaded teacher.

Wilber got his first break when Mezz Mezzrow invited him to perform at the Nice Jazz Festival, where he played with some of the legends of New Orleans jazz such as Bunk Johnson and Louis Armstrong. (It was not all gravy. He also found that some his idols had feet of clay, as when the inept Mezzrow blamed his bloopers on other musicians.)

Like any self-respecting jazz musician, Wilber was not complacent. He played with modernists such as Lennie Tristano and Lee Konitz during his search for his own sound and style. While he grew tired of playing 50-year-old songs, Wilber refused to buy into bebop, which he saw as clichéd as Dixieland. In a music whose nature was constant change, Wilber was an indefatigable player looking to forge a sound that respected the roots of jazz while making an original and contemporary statement.

THE LIFE OF BILLIE HOLIDAY was as excruciating as any in jazz. Her father skipped town when she was a young girl and toured with the Fletcher Henderson band, never lending a hand to his musically inclined daughter.

She claims to have discovered jazz while working as a domestic in a sporting house. Her mother, she says, dropped her off at a Harlem brothel at age 15.

where she discovered with much bitterness that there is no color barrier as far as sex is concerned. An alcoholic and a heroin addict, Holiday was hounded by the law to her very deathbed.

Her memoir, *Lady Sings the Blues* (with William Duffy; Doubleday, 1956), is an observant and pithy



story—not of dope and depravity, which earned her much notoriety and drew some fans eager to watch a talent self-destruct in public—but a wise chronicle of hypocrisy and racial prejudice in the Twentieth century.

Holiday doesn't sensationalize her life and travails, nor does she dish on her hard-living contemporaries. *Lady Sings the Blues* is a well-crafted narrative not only of an artist struggling to succeed, but also of an African-American woman trying to make society pay more than lip service to racial and gender equality.

FOR A WHILE, Babs Gonzales was the hippest guy in the room. Born in 1919 in Newark, New Jersey, he grew up in his mother's bordello, where he learned the art of the hustle and

the quick buck. Among his other money-making ventures (a paper route and gambling), the worldly teen would meet the latest bands to hit Newark and steer them to his mother's restaurant. Amid the grease and grits, Babs rubbed elbows with Basie, Hampton, Holiday and Ellington, and he liked what he saw and heard. Gonzales quickly found his place in the world of music and easy money.

Babs learned from an early age how to tell the hipsters from the squares. Smart and hardworking, he was a bebop vocal stylist, a pimp, a gambler, a dope dealer and a man who could get things done. His memoir, *I Paid My Dues, Good Times...No Bread* (Expubidence Publishing, 1967), is an excellent look at a man who made his living on the fringes of society and the jazz world.

Babs tells of making his way to Los Angeles, where his light complexion and exotic good looks allowed him to don a turban and transform himself into "Ram Singh." Through networking and chutzpah, Babs landed gigs as Errol Flynn's "foreign" chauffeur and as tour guide to the hot spots of Central Avenue.

He got a break as a vocalist when he was asked to fill in for an absent Mel Tormé. He was just getting started, and there was nothing he wouldn't do to keep his career on course, including appearing at the draft office dressed in drag. But Babs found himself involved in the cutthroat music business, where composers and musicians are viewed as parasites by the music publishers. Because Babs was an independent operator, he had to look out for himself and was often put upon by members of the music establishment.

When Babs' composition "Oop-Pop-A-Da" provided a smash hit for Dizzy Gillespie, he found to his fury that Gillespie was given credit as the composer. He demanded that all copies be recalled and re-pressed with his name, inciting the ire of the recording industry. While on tour with his band, Babs scored a hit with "Cool Whalin'." He had learned his lesson: he fronted the money for the recording session and it was his baby.

Unfortunately, the record distributors didn't want to handle a record owned by a black man so, to get the record into stores, Babs hired a white man to front the production as his own. When the record kept selling, the man decided he wanted more of the proceeds. Babs said no, alerted the husbands of three women the front man was having affairs with, and continued with his tour.

Bass Lines: *The Stories and Photographs of Milt Hinton* (with David G. Berger; Temple University Press, 1988) is a beautiful book. Not only is it an excellent recounting of Milt Hinton's life in jazz, it's also full of unique photographs of jazz legends

taken by Hinton over the years.

Born in Vicksburg in 1910, Hinton grew up in Chicago, where his family moved not long after he witnessed his first lynching. Once there, Hinton began violin lessons, saw his favorites such as Armstrong and Barney Bigard in pit bands, and became acquainted with a young Benny Goodman. Hinton went from simple country boy to streetwise kid in a hurry. "During my first couple of years I got picked on quite a bit. I was short, I wore glasses, and I always carried a violin. With a name like Milton, it's no wonder they were after me so much." Putting brains before brawn, Hinton bought protection by completing the math homework of the biggest kid in school.

When Milt was 15, his bootlegger uncle got him a job in a dry cleaner's shop that was really a front for one of Al Capone's distilleries. Hinton used to watch as members of the local constabulary lined up outside the storefront to receive their weekly pay from Capone.

The turning point in Hinton's career path occurred early one morning. As he was preparing to start his paper route, he saw a musician friend arriving home from a gig at the Cotton Club in his brand new car. This prompted Hinton to give up playing the tuba and take up the bass, which offered more opportunities to work in jazz clubs. He cut his teeth with local bands and the likes of Freddie Keppard, then spent the next 16 years crossing the country with Cab Calloway's band. After leaving Calloway, he gigged around, playing the bars of Hoboken, New Jersey with guitarist Danny Barker. Eventually, Hinton came into his own as much-sought-after studio musician. He appeared on over 600 albums and he played with everyone, from Judy Garland to Steve and Eydie to Paul McCartney.

The stories Milt Hinton tells, in the polished prose in *Bass Lines*, of his contact with the greats of jazz are a joy to read. The photographs are a bonus; a volume

of them could stand alone as an excellent record of the jazz life.

MANY JAZZ MEMOIRS are not mentioned in these pages, and most of them are informative and worthwhile reads. But the joy of the bibliophile is the discovery of hitherto unknown books, and there are plenty to keep the jazz book collector busy. And when one has worked his way through the published works, there is a lost treasure or two out there, the books that never made it to the publishing house.

According to jazz chronicler Gary Giddins, these books are out there somewhere: Louis Armstrong wrote a second volume of his autobiography that opens when he arrived in Chicago in the early 1920s. For some reason, Armstrong's manager destroyed the manuscript, but there may be other copies. And then there was Artie Shaw's thousand-page autobiographical novel. "He showed it to me in 1992, and everyone is wondering where it is now—no one seems to know," says Giddins.

"The rarest jazz book is one that hasn't been published, one that disappeared," says Giddins. He is referring to "the most extraordinary manuscript I ever saw," a 1,000-page draft by Elaine Swayne, saxophone great Lester Young's longtime mistress. Swayne was "Lester's Boswell for over 20 years," says Giddins, and she kept the manuscript in a box under her bed. She showed it to Giddins once. "I begged her, begged her to

copy it and put it in a bank vault," he says, but his advice went unheeded. When Swayne died, the manuscript disappeared.

So, jazz fans and collectors can tease themselves with books they may never see, and hope some day to run across these elusive treasures at a yard sale or in an attic. In the meantime, they can find solace in the fact that some of the very best memoirs didn't get away.

