

JAZZ MEMOIRS

by Steven Nester

PUNK ROCKER-TURNED-JAZZ COMPOSER Elvis Costello once opined that writing about music is like dancing to architecture. His point was that the emotions and power of music and their effect on the listener could never be described by words. It's a relationship that exists solely in the ears and minds of the listener, so why read about a brilliant saxophone solo when the only true way to appreciate it is to listen to it?

A fair enough statement, but often the players and their times are just as captivating as the songs. Sometimes the value and meaning of the music connects to more than the individual listener and can be identified as an inseparable part of the period in which it was written and played. Some of those lives and times are chronicled honestly—and sometimes breathtakingly—when musicians put down their horns and pick up a pen.

The memoirs of jazz musicians—along with those of producers, promoters, label owners, club owners, hustlers, junkies, ex-wives, widows, hangers-on and the occasional angel-headed hipster—are fascinating. They depict not only a musician's life, but also the changing world in which he or she lived and how they fit into it.

Often called the Great American Art Form, jazz is a theme song in a history text. To follow the evolution of jazz and examine the lives of its greatest players and sidemen is to look at American history from the time of the horse-drawn buggy to the advent of space travel, and not much that happened in between is overlooked. And the most important part of this history lesson is that jazz happened at the confluence of white culture and black culture. The two races mixed right

under the nose of Jim Crow. Jazz was a collaboration between the races, and it created an enduring art.

Every era in Twentieth-century American history is represented in jazz. Jazz and its chroniclers provide a history lesson with the backbeat of an America coming of age in her most important century. It is the story of the struggle of many to express themselves creatively and to express themselves as Americans.

Dixieland, Traditional and Chicago jazz will put you in New Orleans or a Chicago speakeasy at the beginning of the Roaring Twenties with Bix, Satchmo and a bottle of rye. *Mood Indigo* may have you barnstorming across the Heartland with Duke Ellington during the unsteady 1930s, or, perhaps, rubbing elbows with society swells slumming at Harlem's Cotton Club.

Up to the end of World War Two, Big Band dance music ruled, but musical Fifth Columnists like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie led a bebop rebellion in after-hours clubs. With the onset of the 1950s and well into the 1960s, Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Charles Mingus took jazz to new heights of creativity and experimentation just as the value systems of many Americans were shaken to the core.

Not everyone on the bandstand wrote about their experiences but, luckily for jazz aficionados and book lovers, some did. And more often than not, many of these memoirs were written by musicians who were not well known outside the intense circle of jazz fans or players. The variety of the jazz memoirs is prodigious—from classics by marginal figures, to fierce interior narratives of modern masters, to tales of quiet dignity seemingly whispered in the soft glow of an oil lamp in



Photo courtesy of the Berklee School of Jazz



the shadow of a plantation gone to seed.

What makes a jazz memoir collectable is not necessarily consistent from book to book. Scarcity is always a major criterion. Jazz memoirs can also be entertaining reads, sources of musical information, and represent coming-of-age stories of a young republic. Behavior and social norms we now take for granted were, back in the day, incredible tales of derring-do under some pretty extreme conditions. And with any book, sheer brilliance of literary execution is a sought-after quality.

Some jazz musicians were blessed with the sensibility of a novelist, the keen discernment of a historian and the know-how to pace the book like a practiced storyteller. And honesty—the all-important commodity that gives the reader an unobstructed and unbiased glimpse into the creative mind and the world it inhabited—is nothing without some kind of eloquence.

Diction, phrasing and rhythm of sentence combine in the best of these narratives to create a distinctive voice where the reader can—as much as the writer can approximate—be in the same room as the writer. In some instances, for example Charles Mingus' *Beneath the Underdog* (Knopf, 1971), the reader is on a harrowing journey through the mental landscape of the musician. Without these stylistic attributes, the life of even the most fascinating musician can be a mere laundry list of names and dates, and contain about the same amount of drama and insight.

Readers should also bear in mind that some of the most well regarded jazz memoirs were duets between the musician and a literary collaborator. Others were cleaned-up transcriptions of lengthy taped narratives, or “told to” tales. Even so, the voice of the storyteller remains genuine. Many of these memoirs might best be read with a dose of skepticism and a biography or two for cross-reference. Most importantly, however, these books give the reader an opportunity to sit in on the life and times of artists as they grew up and created a culture on the fly.

Up until the First World War, New Orleans was possibly the most exotic city in North America. The nightclubs, saloons and bordellos of the Storyville section in particular were the stuff of legend in a city that was renowned for pleasure and permissiveness. Early jazz was erotic and visceral, connected at the hip to the blues, and the choice of many who made their living in the wanton trades. It was music that celebrated life without making the listener think too much to enjoy it. All one had to do was feel it. “New Orleans,” said jazzman Sidney Bechet, “that was a place where the music was as natural as the air. The people were ready

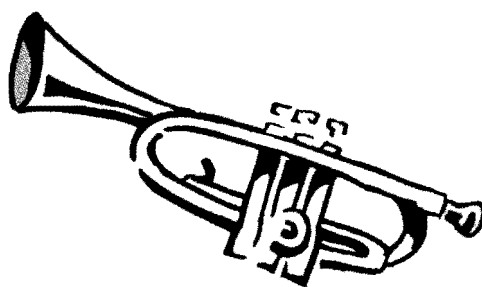
for it like it was sun and rain.” And it was there that jazz pretty much was birthed.

In the beginning, according to popular belief, there was Louis Armstrong. But playing alongside him in New Orleans and other cities were Sidney Bechet, Lee Collins, Baby Dodds, Willie “The Lion” Smith, Danny Barker and many, many others. These players were actually the second and perhaps even the third generation of jazz musicians, but they were among the first to set their life stories to words. With their memoirs, historians and jazz aficionados get a glimpse at some of the earliest players who picked up European instruments, inhaled the rich, fecund funk of the Caribbean Basin, and blew a strange new wind into them, producing a music until then unheard.

Armstrong, Dodds, Bechet, Barker and Collins all wrote memoirs that began in New Orleans. Of Armstrong's two works, *Swing that Music* (Longmans, Green, 1936) has the reputation of being inaccurate and heavily ghostwritten. His second book, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (Prentice, Hall, 1954), is a sometimes fanciful, but always interesting and informative, look at his early years as a boy and young man who at times resembled a Charles Dickens waif. Reading this book feels like having Louis Armstrong sitting beside you, telling you his story.

A self-made Yankee Doodle Dandy who claimed to have been born on July 4, 1900, Armstrong was the son of a prostitute. He spent his youth working and running the streets of New Orleans, a witness to the rawness of life in an open city. The tone of this memoir is buoyant and optimistic; nothing seemed to get in Armstrong's way. He described life with his mother and grandmother as stable, although it was set among bars and brothels, and the characters that owned and frequented them. As a result, Armstrong grew up fast. “As for me I was pretty wise to things. I had been brought up around the honky-tonks on Liberty and Perdido where life was just about the same as it was in Storyville, except the chippies were cheaper.”

Remanded at age 14 to the Colored Waif's Home for Boys for firing a pistol into the air, in *My Life in New Orleans* Armstrong credits the institution and its staff for teaching him values and how to play the cornet. (Other accounts of Armstrong's life put the horn in his hands before his incarceration. With this book and the others mentioned here, readers should take as a given that the memoirists embellish and fabricate some details of their lives. And if skepticism drives you to distraction and setting the record straight is a priority, these memoirs can often be cross-referenced with biographies and other accounts.)



In the honeysuckle-scented New Orleans of his youth, Louis Armstrong claimed to have lived just around the corner from the Funky Butt Saloon, where he heard the legendary ur-cornetist Buddy Bolden play. To make money, Armstrong says, he sold newspapers, rolled dice, salvaged food scraps from garbage cans, worked on a coal wagon, and managed a prostitute who eventually stabbed him. Though his youth was hardscrabble and often violent, Armstrong at times makes it sound downright idyllic, even during his incarceration: "On quiet Sunday nights when I lay on my bunk listening to Freddie Keppard and his jazz band play for some rich white folks about half a mile away, the perfume of these delicious flowers roamed about my nostrils."

The precocious Armstrong was determined to become a jazz musician. He recalled that at a young age, he was able to discern the styles of Bunk Johnson, Buddy Bolden and Joe "King" Oliver, three pioneering cornet players and legends of jazz. With pluck, indefatigable optimism, and a Promethean talent, Armstrong worked his way up from following funeral bands to playing in funeral bands to finally being hired by Kid Ory, a New Orleans pioneer who helped define the trombone's role in early jazz.

But World War One, "the Kaiser's monkey business," was the partial death of New Orleans nightlife and debauchery, when the United States Navy closed the bordellos and bars of Storyville. But, according to Armstrong, "A new generation was about to take over in Storyville. My little crowd had begun to look forward to other kicks, like our jazz band, our quartet and other musical activities." Those who made their living in the saloons and bordellos had to find other employment. Those who could play an instrument, although they had less job security than ever, had good reason to double their efforts to succeed and seek work where they could find it.

Playing in any venue in and around the New Orleans area meant performing under some pretty rough conditions. Some nights found Armstrong closing honkytonks at dawn

in the company of prostitutes who would buy the band drinks and pay nice tips to play their blues requests.

Other times, the band couldn't be so choosy. The Brick House in Gretna, Louisiana "was one of the toughest joints I ever played in," according to Armstrong. "Those guys would drink and fight one another like circle saws. Bottles would come flying across the bandstand like crazy, and there was lots of just plain common shooting and cutting. But somehow all of the jive didn't faze me at all, I was so happy to have some place to blow my horn."

Armstrong's big break came when he was asked to play in Kid Ory's band. Armstrong then took a job with Fate Marable on a riverboat steaming up the Mississippi. Marable was a keyboard player who led bands on various excursion lines on the Mississippi for more than 20 years. Along the way, Armstrong met the "almighty Bix Beiderbecke, the great cornet genius" in Iowa. Then, in 1922, in an emotional

and powerful denouement, Armstrong realized his dream of playing with the great King Oliver when the trumpet master summoned him to Chicago, which had supplanted New Orleans as the headquarters of jazz. There Armstrong forged in the smithy of his soul some of the ground rules of jazz pretty much as we know them.



Photo courtesy of the Berklee School of Jazz



ANOTHER NEW ORLEANS NATIVE who put his story into words was drummer Warren "Baby" Dodds. A simple tale told by a percussion innovator, his memoir is *The Baby Dodds Story* (1959). Dodds began his career by fashioning a drum kit out of tin cans and chair parts. He was only trying to keep up with his older brother Johnny, a clarinet player and important local figure who played for cake at neighborhood parties. Baby then began work at a bag factory for \$1.25 a day in order to finance a proper drum set, one piece at time.

As a kid brother who followed around the

older Johnny, Baby was given the opportunity to play with some mighty figures of the early jazz scene. Johnny played in Kid Ory's band and sometimes Baby was allowed to sit in on gigs. If Baby's playing wasn't professional enough, the band would walk off the stage.

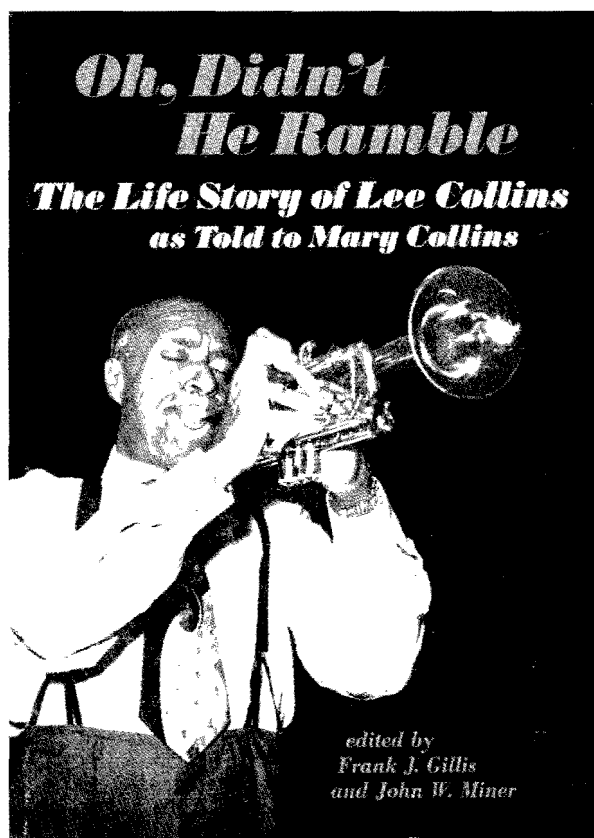
In 1918, Dodds played with Louis Armstrong on a riverboat with Fate Marable. He recounts an instance when the band played for a white audience that boarded in Hannibal, Missouri, "a hard place." Dodds and the band found themselves on the receiving end of some extreme curiosity.

The boat made several trips from the port of Hannibal. The whites who came on board to dance and listen were surprised to find themselves entertained by an all-black band. "They saw Negro roustabouts but had never before seen a Negro with tie and collar on, and a white shirt, playing music. They didn't know what to make of it. But they really liked it. They were the dancingest people I ever found on the boat." Dodds and the band looked forward to the excursions reserved for African-Americans. "It gave us an altogether different sensation because we were free to talk to people and the people could talk to us, and that's a great deal in playing music. We were less tense because it was our own people."

Like other New Orleans players looking to make a living out of the new music, Dodds had to travel, first to San Francisco with King Oliver and then, in 1923, to Chicago, where he remained. Dodds recorded with Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong's Hot Seven, and later played in Europe with Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow. Like many musicians, Baby Dodds could hit the bottle pretty hard. Drinking stories in these memoirs are almost as ubiquitous as Beiderbecke stories. Everyone seemed to have one, or several, stories about hard drinking and/or the hard-drinking jazz trumpeter, Bix Beiderbecke. Dodds recalled that he, Bix and Armstrong all converged once, on a riverboat that made a stop in Davenport, Iowa. Bix and some friends came on board to hear the band. Armstrong didn't have a horn, so he and Bix went out to buy one.

Musicians learned much from Baby Dodds and his

brother Johnny, and any time a musician was in the audience, he was usually there to get pointers. Jazzmen Gene Krupa, Pee Wee Russell, Benny Goodman and Zutty Singleton were among those who came to listen and learn. They were simply carrying on the tradition of musicians playing and sharing musical ideas in an improvised school that gave pointers for improvised playing.



CORNET PLAYER AND BIG EASY NATIVE Lee Collins began his memoir *Oh, Didn't He Ramble* in 1943, but it remained unpublished until 1970, 14 years after his death. The book is a simple and honest account of the life and times of a jazz musician. A contemporary of Armstrong born in 1901, Collins grew up in a New Orleans where the older, more accomplished musicians allowed the younger ones to play right alongside them, all in a milieu of saloons, brothels and after-hours clubs. At 14, Collins recalled, he was asked by the wife of trumpet great Buddy Petit, who was drunk, to fill in for him at a gig. Collins accepted, swiped his uncle's best suit and Stetson, and showed up at the saloon, only to be told by the saloon owner that he was too young to play.

Collins' account of the early New Orleans jazz scene and those who participated is fascinating and encyclopedic. He played alongside just about everyone: Buddy Petit, Louis Armstrong, Edmond Hall, Sidney Bechet and Jelly Roll Morton. His book shares his firsthand knowledge of New Orleans musicians, both famous and unknown, who were members of the first and second generations of this developing art form. When Armstrong left the King Oliver band, it was Collins who took his place. Collins also had the questionable distinction of being able to accuse Morton, one of the first great composers of jazz, of stealing "Fish Tail Blues" from him.

According to the Armstrong and Collins books, New Orleans was nonstop music, no matter where in the city you were. Parties, funerals, store openings, parades for social clubs—everything, it seemed, was done with a band playing in the background. But when it came time for a band to advertise an

upcoming engagement, things could sometimes get downright raucous. Stories of “cutting matches,” or “battles of the bands,” are told by all five early jazz chroniclers featured here. “Bloodless manslaughter,” trumpeter Max Kaminsky called them, “committed in the deepest sincerity.”

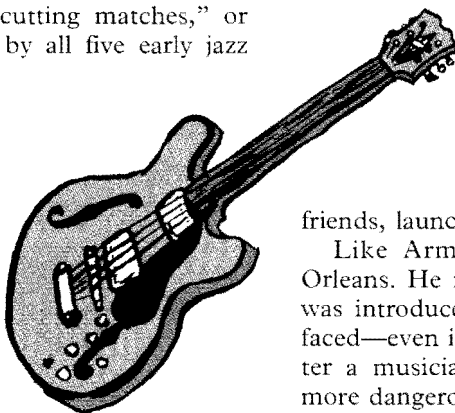
In these bloodless battles, a horse-drawn wagon carrying a band would travel through New Orleans to advertise an upcoming gig, and the streets would come alive with music and people. And in a city known for music, it wasn't uncommon for competing bands to converge on a sweltering intersection where soloists and sidemen were expected to put their skills and egos on the line. Reputations were made and lost.

IN HIS BOOK, Collins takes credit for prompting a young man named Danny Barker to take up the banjo and for giving Barker his first job in a band.

Barker was a young ukulele player already known for his musical ability. But when Collins encountered the 16-year-old who, he recalled, was “dressed like a pimp,” he took Barker to a music store and bought him a banjo. Or so he claimed.

Sartorial flash notwithstanding, Danny Barker came from a family with a lot of musical class. His mother was a Barbarin. Her father, Isidore, drove a hearse by day and played in the Onward Brass Band at night. Three of Barker's Barbarin uncles were active in the New Orleans jazz scene with Paul Barbarin, a drummer, the most renowned. But the tale of Lee Collins purchasing him a banjo is nowhere to be found in Barker's excellent memoir *A Life in Jazz* (1986). Found among its pages are incredible memories of growing up in New Orleans as a member of a solid African-American middle class and the carefree, almost Tom Sawyer-esque adventures and shenanigans Barker and his pals enjoyed.

In one such story, young Barker was on his way to shine shoes one day when he saw some younger boys making money in honkytonks by dancing and playing improvised instruments, a phenomenon



known as “spasm bands.” Barker, who was taking clarinet lessons from the great Barney Bigard prior to Bigard's joining the King Oliver Band, was an enterprising youth. He dropped the licorice stick, grabbed a ukulele abandoned by one of his aunts and, after recruiting several

friends, launched a career in music.

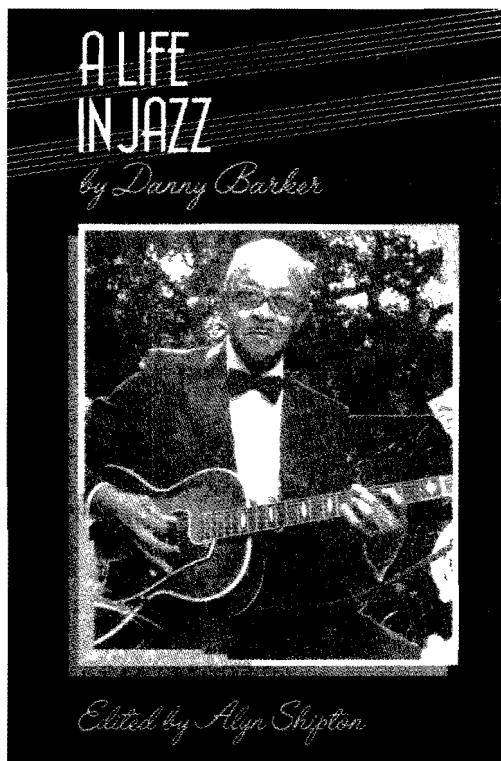
Like Armstrong, Barker grew up fast in New Orleans. He made the rounds of nightspots, where he was introduced to the racial bigotry a black musician faced—even if his music was appreciated. And the better a musician a young black man came to be, the more dangerous the music business could become.

The climate of favoritism and nepotism in the New Orleans jazz scene prompted Barker to travel elsewhere in search of work. He decided to take a tour of the juke joints in the “fearsome” state of Mississippi. When a black juke joint owner there murdered two black card cheats from Texas, the white sheriffs were concerned only with the disposal of the bodies. When a local woman flirted with him in a saloon, the club owner pulled him aside and lectured him about fast women

and their powerful white lovers. The club owner pointed across the room, where the white sheriff watched from the corner. When he was summoned to play for an old backwoods white man who raised bloodhounds for the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Barker was paid in Confederate money. Back in his home state, Barker was hired to play at a political rally in 1926, and had to listen as the politician promised to keep “niggers in their place.”

One of the most memorable tales is the story of a stop President Franklin Roosevelt made in Harlem during his campaign for a second term reelection. While First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and other dignitaries awaited the arrival of the presidential motorcade,

a truck rumbled down the street, its P.A. system blaring the lascivious *Don't You Feel My Legs*, penned by none other than Danny Barker. Pandemonium ensued. The Secret Service had the music stopped and demanded to know who wrote the song. Barker beat it



into the crowd. The next day, Decca told him that although his song was a hit, the Federal Government forbade the pressing of any more copies.

SIDNEY BECHET comported himself like a gentleman. Born in 1897 to a respectable Creole family, as a young boy he couldn't understand why his light-skinned mother would marry his father, who was the son of a slave. In his memoir *Treat it Gentle* (Hill and Wang, 1960), Bechet comes across as kind, thoughtful and well-spoken, but those qualities didn't prevent him from drinking hard, playing hard and spending time in jail.

A prodigy who played with Bunk Johnson and Buddy Petit, young Bechet traded Bull Durham tobacco for clarinet lessons and had to be escorted through New Orleans' many red-light districts in order to play gigs in other neighborhoods. Early in Bechet's career, he invited a young Louis Armstrong and his vocal quartet to come to his house and perform for his family. When an embarrassed Armstrong declined because of his worn shoes, Bechet gave him 50 cents to have them repaired. Armstrong kept the money and skipped the engagement.

Like his contemporaries, Bechet traveled in search of experience and work. Stranded in Galveston after employment dried up, he spent some time in jail. There, he recalled, he played the blues for the very first time, surrounded by a choir of drunks and lost souls. Bechet sailed to Paris with Josephine Baker, and played behind her in *The Revue Nègre*.

When renown took him to Buckingham Palace for a command performance, Bechet commented that the palace resembled "Grand Central Station with a lot of carpets and things on the walls. Only it had more doors." He recognized a member of the audience, King George V, from his regal visage on a bank note. One of Bessie Smith's many lovers, Bechet knew her well enough to compliment her on, of all things, her green thumb. He claimed to have taken Smith to Okeh records to cut her first record, a demo of *I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate*.

Bechet's memoir displays a contemplative, contradictory and complicated man. He is sensitive to

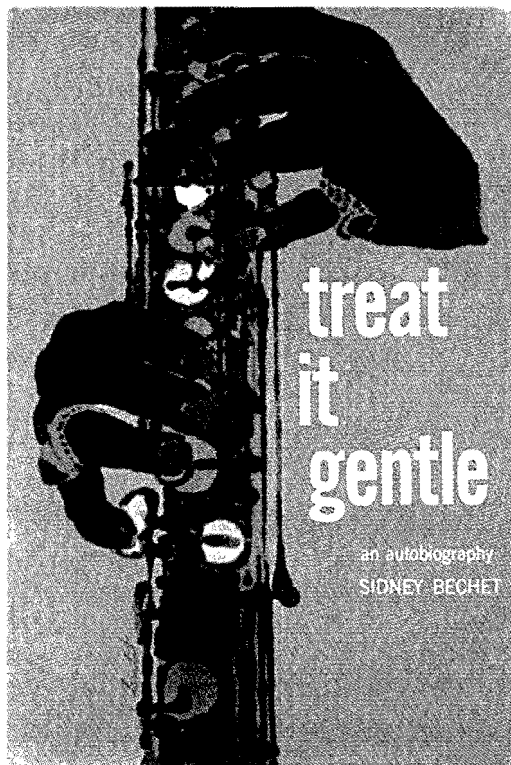
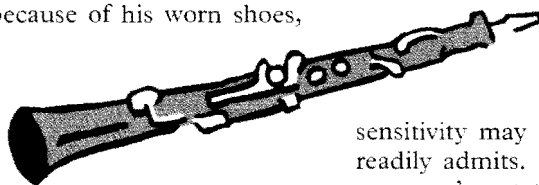


Photo courtesy of Between the Covers Rare Books, Inc.



music: where it comes from and how it's played. He describes how a jazz musician puts feeling, musical knowledge and personal experience into jazz and improvisation. "A man, he's got all kinds of things in him and the music wants to talk to all of him. The music is everything that it wants to say to a man. Some of it came up from jokes and some of it came up from sorrow, but all of it has a man's feelings in it."

Bechet could be a difficult personality. He disliked sheet music because it was the antithesis of improvisation and he detested contracts, which he considered a symbol of the commercialization of jazz. And surprisingly, he also took issue with white musicians, at least in print. He felt it "...awful

hard for a man who isn't black to play a melody that's come deep out of black people. It's a question of feeling." But this didn't prevent him from playing with and befriending white musicians like Mezz Mezzrow and Eddie Condon.

Men of such strong feeling and sensitivity may also have a darker side, which Bechet readily admits. "I can be mean. It takes an awful lot; someone's got to do a lot to me. But when I do get mean, I can be powerful mean." Murderously mean, almost. Bechet was all business when it came to money, and pulled a knife on Mezz when looking to collect on a debt. A contretemps on the streets of Paris resulted in a gun battle during which Bechet shot several people.

In his long career Bechet played with everyone from his musical forefathers to Louis Armstrong to Charlie Parker. *Treat it Gentle* is a high point of self-expression and first-person recounting of a life in jazz.

BIX BEIDERBECKE transcended the world of jazz. So enigmatic that he lent himself to fiction, Beiderbecke was the basis for Dorothy Baker's 1938 novel, *Young Man with a Horn*. A trumpet genius wrapped in reticence surrounded by a whisky bottle, he was the quintessential tortured artist, known to many, but known by only a few.

The legend of Bix Beiderbecke began in Davenport, Iowa in 1903, and ended just 28 years



later, in 1931. This dreaming son of Babbitt was a rebel whose truancy from school was due to late nights in Chicago jazz clubs and landed him in military school. Chicago and jazz continued to beckon; soon enough, he was expelled and finished with book learning forever.

Beiderbecke didn't write a memoir (he couldn't even read music), so it must have been fate that brought him to the Berton clan. An extraordinary family of turn-of-the-century bohemians who tramped across the country from Hollywood to New York stopping at points in between, the Bertons worked in the movies, in classical music, in fine arts and, most importantly, in jazz.

Gene Berton, a classical singer and composer, introduced Bix to the works of Debussy, which influenced Beiderbecke's later compositions. Brother Vic was a drummer in the Wolverines band, which barnstormed across the Midwest. Brother Ralph was a sometime child actor who went on to edit the periodicals *Metronome* and *Down Beat*. Perhaps most importantly, Ralph Berton was the awe-struck kid brother—part

Boswell and part Beaver Cleaver—who wrote *Remembering Bix: A Memoir of the Jazz Age*

(Harper and Row, 1974).

This book is a hybrid. It's part biography, part memoir, part family history, part social history, part psychological profile, and entirely opinionated. It's also a fascinating story about a sophisticated family that interacted with the artists and trendsetters of the day. While most people were going to bed early and saving to buy a Model T, the Bertons were living large in the world of art and ideas.

Berton's narrative also helps humanize a legend. Bix, who was a sort of brother by default, was always a welcomed boarder in the Berton household. Berton removes Bix from his pedestal and shows him padding around in his socks and BVDs, munching a bowl of cereal and noodling away on the family piano. In another vignette, Berton is organizing a game of sandlot baseball in the spring of 1919 when he runs into an extremely whiskey-worn Bix, who is stumbling home in a filthy tuxedo. Bix jumps into the game, tuxedo, patent leather shoes, and all.

Another story has Berton and Bix wandering around the south side of Chicago looking for kicks. When the strains of Bessie Smith's *Beal Street Mama* waft from an open window, Ralph and Bix become engaged in conversation with some fellow jazz fans, who happen to be female. They invite Ralph and Bix in, and the boys find their new friends work in a whorehouse. Things become even more jolly when it's discovered the madam has several Wolverines recordings on which Bix is featured. But just as things begin to warm up, the local constabulary breaks up the party.

The perpetually homeless Beiderbecke eventually joined the Paul Whiteman orchestra and was lost to Ralph Berton. And except for the memories and myths, Bix was lost to the world with his premature death in 1931. Written in the tone of an irreverent hipster with plenty of asides, casual locutions, and punctuations and spellings inspired by e.e. cummings, *Remembering Bix* is an excellent narrative of how jazz was made and who made it during the 1920s.

WILLIAM HENRY JOSEPH BONAPARTE BERTHOLOFF SMITH would, by any other name, still be one of the pioneers of stride piano, a style that relies upon the left hand to play strong and constant rhythm against the melody played by the right hand. Given the valorous sobriquet "Lion" while serving in a gunnery unit in the trenches of France during World War One, Willie "The Lion" Smith was born in Goshen, New York in 1897 and grew up in Newark, New Jersey. His mother taught him to play the piano, a pursuit made easier when he won an upright piano in a "guess how many beans are in the jar" contest. A religious woman, Smith's mother would play a hymn, and then ask young Willie play it. Willie would "sit down and turn it into a rag," an exercise in improvisation that was not appreciated by Mom.

Smith's real education took place in the cabarets and saloons of Newark, Harlem and the then-premier resort of Atlantic City. He learned to play, and he learned to drink, and he learned to wear a derby and carry a cane. He knew he had to look sharp, that it "behooved us to look spectacular." Smith understood right from the start that he was in show business.

His memoir, *Music on My Mind: The Memoirs of an American Pianist* (with George Hoefer. Doubleday, 1964), is an opinionated and articulate look at urban entertainment before the jukebox. A musical insider during the days when dressing well was part of the game, Smith's narrative has a restrained hip patois that doesn't bowl one over. He is generous with self-directed compliments without becoming overbearing. This book has plenty of personality, and none of it sounds contrived.

Before the jukebox there was the piano, and anywhere liquor was served, you'd find a piano, too. A piano player had to do more than just play; he had to be able to tell a joke or a story, accompany a singer, and hold his liquor. According to Smith, a piano player had to know at least 100 songs. Popular songs, blues and even classical numbers were part the musical arsenal. And piano players were in demand: "Piano players had it made like a hair-cutting man or an undertaker back in those good old days. No matter where you went, there was work waiting for you." And this enabled them to take employment at other venues, where they could mingle with other musicians, learn new songs and techniques, and check out the competition. But if a musician wanted to do a little job-hopping, he had to find a replacement first.

When Smith needed a replacement, or "trial horse," he tried to find a player whose ability was inferior to his own, thereby ensuring he could get his job back. In one instance, Smith thought he had found a "trial horse" that fit those requirements, but instead he almost lost his job. Friend and fellow stride pioneer James P. Johnson walked into Smith's club with a

"16-year-old fat boy" so slovenly Smith immediately dubbed him "Filthy." Smith took his time off, confident his job was secure. When he returned, he found the young player had already built a following. Smith considered himself lucky to get his job back. The young pianist soon earned his own place in the jazz pantheon, known to jazz aficionados worldwide as Thomas "Fats" Waller.

When Smith was on the road, he enjoyed challenging piano players to cutting contests. Once in Chicago, a young player was trotted out by the manager of a club who thought the boy could give Smith a run for his money. It turned out the kid only knew a couple of songs, while Smith was in command of several hundred. Embarrassed, the youngster turned tail and ran. In the coming years, however, he enlarged his skills, and made a name for himself as Earl "Fatha" Hines.

Smith's talent took him from Harlem rent parties to George Gershwin's penthouse, with plenty of stops in between. Everyone came to hear Smith play, from musicians to gangsters to society types, but the real interest of *Music on My Mind* is its depiction of Harlem nightlife, the beginnings of 52nd Street as a jazz crossroads, and how Smith and his contemporaries negotiated the uncharted world of jazz during the 1920s.

IF TRUMPETER MAX KAMINSKY had never existed, Saul Bellows would have made him up. Born in 1908 to a Russian-Jewish immigrant family in the unlikely jazz town of Boston, Kaminsky grew up in the racially

diverse Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods. He was smart and streetwise, and always on the make for a band that could swing. To play jazz in the land of the Pilgrims one had to be brash, and Kaminsky was that. He also had enoughchutzpah to write *Jazz Band: My Life in Jazz* (as told to V.E. Hughes. Harper and Row, 1963).

From the beginning, Kaminsky was a kid on the move. He constructed a crystal radio from plans printed in *The Boston Globe*. When it failed, he built a one-tube unit, which was more successful. The first sound he heard from it was Ted Lewis playing *Tiger Rag*. Kaminsky was hooked. "It was like finding diamonds, if you likes diamonds." An older sister



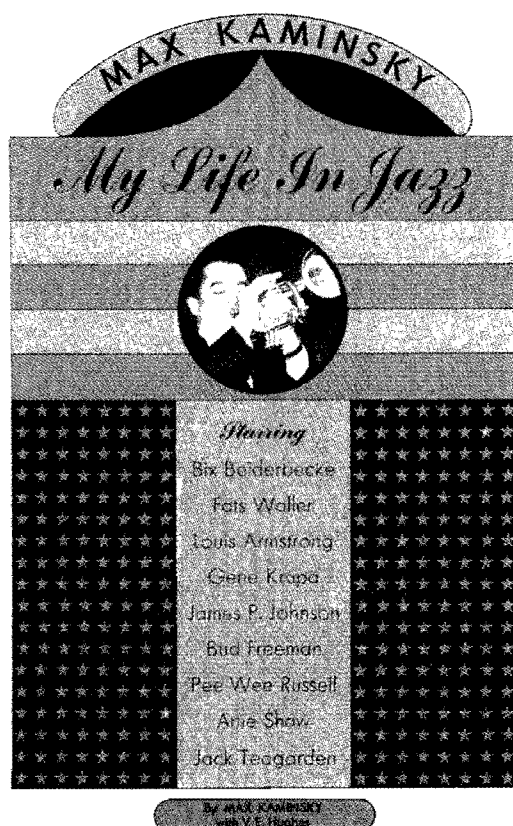
MUSIC ON MY MIND:
THE MEMOIRS OF AN AMERICAN PIANIST
WILLIE THE LION SMITH
WITH George Hoefer

introduced him to gospel music at neighborhood African-American churches. At age eight, he swapped one of his crystal radios for a cornet belonging to a sister's boyfriend. He formed a band, won a talent contest, and by the age of 14 had a reputation and work as a musician. He soon made his way to Chicago, which had overtaken New Orleans as the center of jazz.

By age 20, Kaminsky was playing with Bud Freeman, Gene Krupa, Joe Venuti, Eddie Condon, Pee Wee Russell, Mezz Mezzrow, Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, among others. It was on Kaminsky's recommendation that Artie Shaw hired a young singer named Billie Holiday. Finally able to play with people of like sensibilities, Kaminsky was ecstatic. "Now I knew how Lindbergh felt, only better. For the first time in my life I was playing with musicians who could swing—this was like flying *without* an airplane."

In retrospect, hardship and privation are easier to take. In the 1920s and 1930s, when many jazz musicians were young and at loose ends, there was plenty of nothing for everyone. In *Jazz Band*, Kaminsky makes it sound almost like fun. Bouncing around the country in rattletrap cars trying to get to their gigs, hoping to run into fellow players, meeting women, going to parties, listening to the latest Armstrong or Beiderbecke record on someone's phonograph—these musicians who played jazz when jazz was still being tinkered with had a lot of the bohemian in them, along with a strong streak of immigrant work ethic and plenty of good old American "can do." They wanted to make a go of this new form of entertainment, and it wasn't always easy.

Finding like-minded musicians and an audience willing to pay was something altogether different. Kaminsky, who spent much of his early life happily playing with musicians who shared his musical taste, later experienced a good deal of frustration with having to spend so much time hustling society band gigs to support his family. Balancing the demands of art and commerce seemed to be the price for being a successful professional musician.



By MAX KAMINSKY
with V.E. Hughes

EDDIE CONDON was the type of guy who would sneak your father's liquor, pinch your mother's derriere, seduce your sister, and still be invited to Sunday dinner. He was a wisecracker with a heart of gold, a wit and a raconteur, a clotheshorse and a drinker. He was a guitar player, nightclub owner, radio show host, newspaper columnist, concert organizer, a tireless booster of Dixieland Jazz, and the author of *We Called it Music: A Generation of Jazz* (with Thomas Sugrue. Holt, 1947).

Born in 1905 in Indiana to the children of Irish immigrants, this barefoot boy spent little time dozing atop a Hoosier haystack. After coming into possession of a banjo, he practiced in the light of a coal furnace in the basement, sitting on an upturned wheelbarrow. Condon's father was a

saloonkeeper. When the Eighteenth Amendment was passed, Old Man Condon turned from saloon owner to cop.

Filled with wry humor and wisecracks, *We Called it Music* is an opinionated recounting of jazz as it began to be appreciated and played by small-town boys in the Midwest. It's also the story of Condon's and his contemporaries' struggle to promote the new music: to get it out of saloons and into salons, to get it played, appreciated and recorded. It was hard to keep Condon and his contemporaries down on the farm after they'd heard Armstrong and Beiderbecke.

At age 17, Eddie hit the road, headed for the Big Time. First stop, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He ended up with Peavy's Jazz Bandits, where he learned the rudiments of reading music and music theory. After gigging around and becoming known, he was invited to take a gig in Syracuse with a band that included a new kid. Condon took one look at the kid's floppy hat and labeled him a "clamdigger," a rube. That new kid was Bix Beiderbecke.

It wasn't until Condon, Bix and the rest of the band made the rounds of the Chicago nightspots that Condon realized Beiderbecke might be someone special. Everyone on every bandstand knew him. When Beiderbecke put his trumpet to his lips and played, "The

sound came out like a girl saying yes."

Barnstorming through the Midwest for young, unmarried musicians who played a new type of music that only the young seemed to understand was an experience like none other. Playing a one-nighter here, a week-long gig there, hoping to find an audience that had tired of waltzes and foxtrots, Condon and all those who came before him in the short 20 or so years jazz had been in existence were cultural emissaries.

Pulling into a new town in their jalopy was always a fresh adventure. They played wherever they were paid, and not all audiences were made up of curious country folk or John Held Jr. flappers giddy with gin and looking for thrills. One night, in a rush from the bar to the bandstand, drummer Dave Tough gruffly jostled a husky man out of his path. The man was the club owner, "Bottles" Capone, Al's brother. On another occasion, Condon romanced a beautiful young woman at a gig in Chicago. He whisked her across the dance floor, whispered in her ear and held her hand beneath the table, blind to the imploring gazes of his band mates. The object of his fascination was Kiki Roberts, who was the significant other of the notorious bootlegger and murderer Jack "Legs" Diamond.

While listening to friends on the bandstand, in the

audience with Condon was composer Maurice Ravel. He was completely amazed by the musicianship and group improvisation, which Condon called the process of "everybody knitting from their own ball of yarn." It was this group and solo improvisation that were challenging and new to audiences, and as a pitchman and traveling salesman for the new music, Condon and his contemporaries often ran into problems while trying to make a living without compromising their vision and integrity.

Besides foot-soldiering it through the hinterlands, Condon's other contributions to jazz were leading mixed-race groups on stage and in the studio, keeping the early style of jazz he favored alive and available. He was able to bring his music to the masses when he hosted live weekly radio broadcasts from Town Hall in Manhattan during the mid-1940s, where he made his reputation as a wit, musician, bandleader and booster for jazz. Condon recorded up to his death, having fun, keeping friends employed, and ensuring that Dixieland jazz wouldn't be forgotten.

BUD FREEMAN'S MEMOIR *You Don't Look Like a Musician* (Balamp Publishing, 1974) is a mad-deni-ly chaotic scrapbook of thoughts, closely inspected minutiae, observations and scenarios that seem to have been scribbled over the years on the backs of cocktail napkins and matchbook covers and

then assembled into a book. Pithy, idiosyncratic, and sometimes blasé, some of the episodes have a "you had to have been there" feel to them, as if Freeman has remembered the events, but forgotten their significance. If there ever was a bundle of vain strivings tied into a book, this is it. So why bother with it? Because throughout this slim volume are gems of jazz history come alive.

You Don't Look Like a Musician is one of two memoirs written by this member of the Austin High Gang, a bunch of Chicago high school students who, in the 1920s, learned to play instruments after hearing King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band featuring Louis Armstrong,

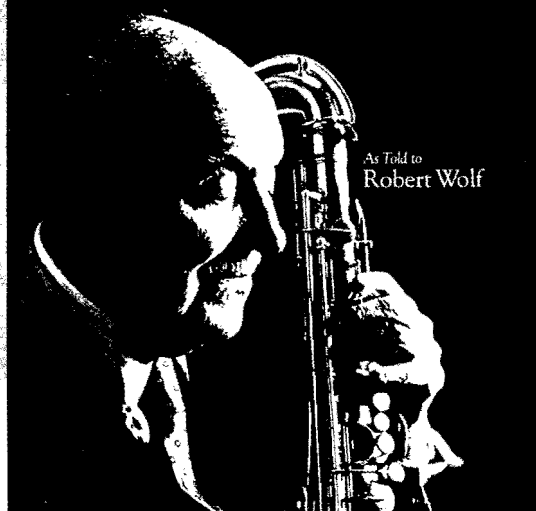
YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A MUSICIAN

**bud
freeman**

BUD FREEMAN

Crazeology

The Autobiography of a
Chicago Jazzman



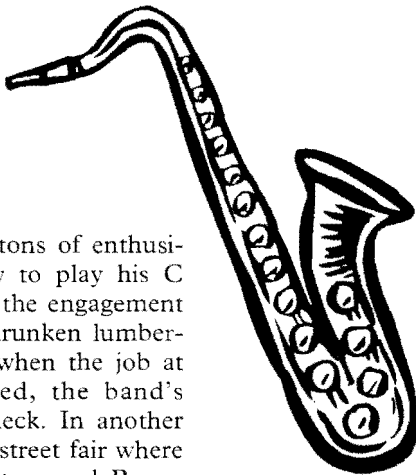
As Told to
Robert Wolf

Sidney Bechet and Baby Dodds, play at the Lincoln Garden in Chicago.

Freeman had plenty of jazz-related anecdotes to relate. When Freeman was hired for his very first gig by drummer Dave Tough, he had tons of enthusiasm for jazz but no real ability to play his C Melody saxophone. He survived the engagement and avoided being done in by drunken lumberjacks and college students, but when the job at the Wisconsin roadhouse ended, the band's piano player nearly wrung his neck. In another instance, he recalled attending a street fair where he heard a 13-year-old clarinetist named Benny Goodman play. Fats Waller once asked Freeman's opinion of a piano phrase that just passed through his head, then stopped mid-meal to begin composing *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

Freeman wrote another memoir, *Crazeology: The Autobiography of a Chicago Jazzman* (as told to Robert Wolf. University of Illinois Press, 1989), in which he recounts many of the stories in the first book along with new ones. This time around, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and a blue pencil were close at hand. *Crazeology* is a simple chronological narrative of declarative sentences with some rhyme and reason. We are spared the helter-skelter disorganization of the first book and introductions to such people as Joe Stryon of Detroit, Michigan, "a swinging playboy and the best dentist in town."

The veracity of other memoirists is at bay, namely Mezz Mezzrow, when Freeman recounts them being stranded together in Kansas. The way Mezz told it, the boys had to participate in the town wheat harvest, with Bud bursting at the seams with vitality. The way Bud tells it, there was simply a dance and he and his band supplied the music. Bud also blows the whistle on Wingy Manone, who comes across as a happy-go-lucky musician. Beneath the veneer of Wingy's New Orleans charm there was one tough customer. According to Bud, Wingy was about to



become the robbery victim of a prostitute and her pimp when he turned the tables and robbed them.

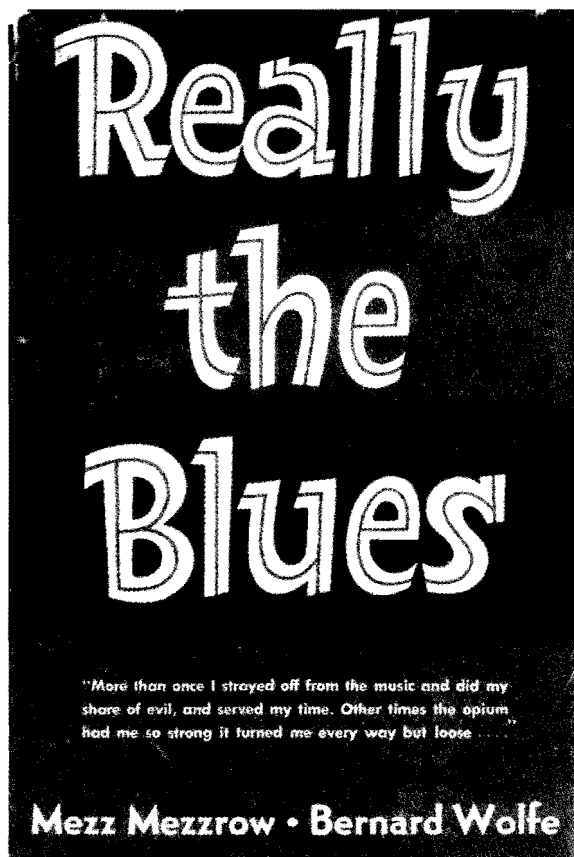
When read together, *You Don't Look Like a Musician* and *Crazeology* give an excellent look at how busy musicians were in the 1920s and 1930s, hustling for work and looking for fellow travelers, and how they got along on and off the bandstand.

BEFORE "HIP" AND "COOL" were codified, before Norman Mailer identified the "White Negro," before there was any pretense of a white man walking in the shoes of an African-American except when wearing blackface, there was Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow. Born

Milton Mesirow in Chicago in 1899, Mezz understood from the very beginning the role of the outlaw in jazz and society, and lived the part for all it was worth. A so-so reed player who was more valued for his marijuana connections than his musical ability, this white ur-hipster rebel associated himself with African-Americans and jazz musicians, eventually moving to Harlem with his African-American wife. Mezzrow's memoir *Really the Blues* (with Bernard Wolfe. Random House, 1946)

is a classic. In it, he proselytizes on race relations, jazz, jazz musicians, dope, gangsters and himself in an irrepressible pedal-to-the-metal fashion. Descriptive and eminently quotable, *Really the Blues* is hard to put down. It is a narrative of sustained tone, outlook and invention, and on any page the reader will find a jive expression, perhaps dated now, but still possessing some of the vitality and enthusiasm of the moment it once occupied.

Mezz prided himself on being a successful graduate of the School of Hard Knocks. "Music school? Are you kidding? I learned to play the sax in Pontiac Reformatory." From a respectable Jewish family of professionals and businessmen, Mezz was no hardened criminal. It was a joyride in a stolen car that got him incarcerated the first time, but later on



drugs and other addictions got him put away. Mezz took pride in being a link between blacks and whites. He learned about Jim Crow the hard way; as a Jew in prison, the establishment lumped him with blacks, and he soon found that musicians weren't considered any more favorably. Ironically, it was through these two groups that Mezz found his own brand of salvation. It is what Mezzrow identified as the African-American's particular form of *joie de vivre* that he found so attractive: the ability to take life one moment at a time and put it in a perspective where everything can be enjoyed. When problems arose, African-Americans can "toss it off with a laugh and a mournful, but not too mournful song about it." Freedom of individual expression was also high on Mezzrow's list, both verbally and musically. He dedicated long passages in the book to the art of jive talking, which he called the secret language of the hip.

When not in prison, Mezz cut his teeth on the street. Hanging around Southside Chicago jazz clubs, becoming a denizen of gangster-owned joints where jazz was played, getting to know the musicians, stealing his sister's sealskin coat to sell for a saxophone, making the scene with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and practice, practice, practice eventually got the limber-lipped Mezz into a band. Unfortunately, Mezz wasn't really that good, but on dates he was tolerated by the real musicians, Bechet and Condon among them. Luckily for him, he had other skills to offer.

Mezz was known as a kind of hipper-than-thou den mother for young musicians, an endless promoter of jazz, and a champion of African-Americans. In addition to playing, he founded and ran his own record label for a while, but it was for things like supplying musicians with pot, guidance and friendship—and writing *Really the Blues*—that Mezz is known best.

A FIRST IMPRESSION of Wingy Manone's *Trumpet on the Wing* (with Paul Vandervoort II. Doubleday and Co., 1948) is that it reads like a quick and superficial rewriting of Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues*. The jive talk is there along with the simple pleasures of food and friendship and the elation of playing,

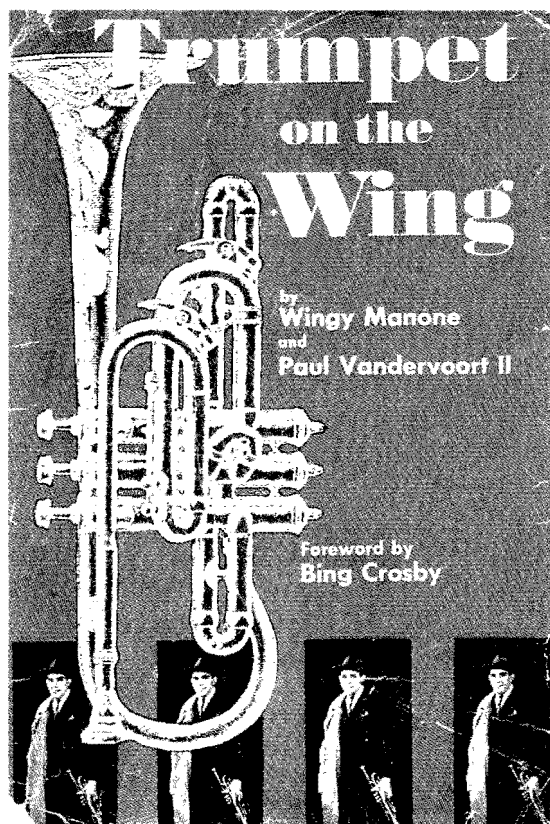
but unlike Mezz, Wingy had no baggage to carry or agenda to live by. To him life was one good time after another and was appreciated for the humor and vitality it contained.

In the world of New Orleans native Joseph Matthew "Wingy" Manone, there were two kinds of people: those who could swing, and those who couldn't. Like his contemporaries, Manone was a musician tinkering with a brand-new art form and searching for other musicians who could play the music he heard in his head. He knew what he wanted early on, and to get it, he quit school at 10. He also was involved in a streetcar accident that resulted in his losing his right arm, which gained him the nickname Wingy.

Before long, Wingy was running the streets, hanging around the levees, shooting dice and getting into mischief. He claims to have thrown rocks at neighborhood interlopers such as Louis Armstrong and Zutty Singleton. Work was driving a jitney cab, sorting bananas for United Fruit, and learning to play the trumpet.

Wingy began playing gigs locally and, when they dried up, he and his friends rode the rails to Chicago. When the train stopped, the band would hit the streets and play for handouts. At one stop they entered the grounds of an insane asylum, where they played for their dinner and cigarette money. They made it to Chicago, but didn't find much work there. Wingy kissed his trumpet for breakfast, broke up the band and headed to New York. There he acquainted himself with other musicians like the Dorsey brothers, Eddie Condon and Bing Crosby, and set about learning the repertoire and style of jazz.

The 1920s might have roared, but for musicians scuffling to make a living playing jazz, times were tough, and getting tougher. Wingy headed back to Chicago, where weddings and dance bands paid the bills. He even played in a band that required him to dress like an Indian and whoop it up on stage. On the road in Davenport, Iowa, he claimed to have passed by a schoolhouse where inside someone was playing the piano. It was Bix Beiderbecke. Wingy ended up playing with Beiderbecke, but the two were fired when it was discovered they couldn't read music. And so



he began the life of the itinerant jazz musician, playing gigs for pay and jamming with the likes of Armstrong and King Oliver in the wee hours for practice and camaraderie.

Wingy hooked up with trombone player Jack Teagarden, who played in a cowboy band in New Mexico, and recalls that the two buried a Louis Armstrong record in the desert, hoping to petrify it for posterity. Wingy wrote a song titled *Tarpaper Stomp*. But when Glen Miller got his hands on it he renamed it *In the Mood*. It's no wonder that some early musicians hid their fingers from other players to keep their ideas and techniques a secret. The 1930s brought stability to Wingy, along with radio and movie work and a friendship with Bing Crosby. In fact, when Crosby's house was destroyed by fire, some of his sports coats survived with only the right sleeve burned off. Wingy claimed them for himself. Funny, yes, but Wingy used a prosthetic arm.

BE CAREFUL OF WHAT YOU MIGHT ASK Ethel Waters. Were she still alive, she just might tell you. Waters' memoir *His Eye is on the Sparrow* (with Charles Samuels. Doubleday, 1951) is a brutally honest observation of her life, which began in the ghettos of Philadelphia and took her to the Broadway stage and Hollywood. Beholden to nothing but her talent and the agent of her fame, Ethel Waters was born at the bottom of society and never forgot where she came from.

Born in 1896 to a mother who had been raped by a mixed-blood man, Ethel Waters grew up in extreme poverty, raised by two drunken aunts. Her mother worked as a scullion and was absent most of the time. Her neighbors were prostitutes for whom she sometimes ran errands. She watched as a cousin died slowly from drugs and syphilis. If one didn't grow up fast in this environment, one didn't grow up at all. By her own admission a foul-mouthed guttersnipe ("My vile tongue was my shield"), Ethel credits this hell-on-earth with giving her morals, values and the iron will of a survivor.

Married at 13 and divorced a year later, Ethel found work in hotels and began socializing in bars

and nightclubs. And like all great talents, she didn't find her gift, it found her.

A casual singer possessed of talent but with no second opinion to confirm a calling, Ethel Waters, who believed so much in the guidance and power of the spirit, had her audition with fate. At a Halloween party where the entertainment didn't show up, an underage Ethel was enlisted to sing. Two vaudevillians were present, and hired the 17-year-old for a two-week engagement in Baltimore. At her professional debut, Waters sang "The St. Louis Blues," becoming the first woman to sing it professionally. Lightning had struck twice for Ethel Waters, who began calling herself Sweet Mama Stringbean.

Unloved as a child and vastly insecure as an adult, Ethel was loath to put all her eggs in one basket. In the

early days of jazz, many musicians held other jobs. Sidney Bechet, for example, was a tailor. Ethel Waters made sure she had a job waiting for her in case things didn't work out in Baltimore. In fact, even when taking a break from the stage, Waters would seek domestic work. Though fame was coming to her, she felt uncomfortable with it. She still felt alone, unloved and rootless, just as she had when growing up. The contentiousness and backbiting of show business were stressful. She wanted stability and order. Her real ambition, she claimed early in her singing career, was to become the personal maid of a wealthy globetrotter. Making it up the ladder to success was one thing, maintaining that success was another.

As Ethel became more renowned, her stories included more of the celebrated. Early on, she shared a bill with Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues. Smith, an imperious diva, demanded that Ethel not be allowed to sing the blues. Ethel agreed, but the raucous crowd demanded that Ethel sing her songs. The management sheepishly importuned on Ethel's behalf, but not without a battle from Bessie. Eventually, the two singers reached an understanding. Sophie Tucker once paid Waters for a private recital so she could study Waters' style. Heavyweight champion Jack Johnson complained to Ethel that black women didn't give him the type of respect and attention he wanted, which was the reason

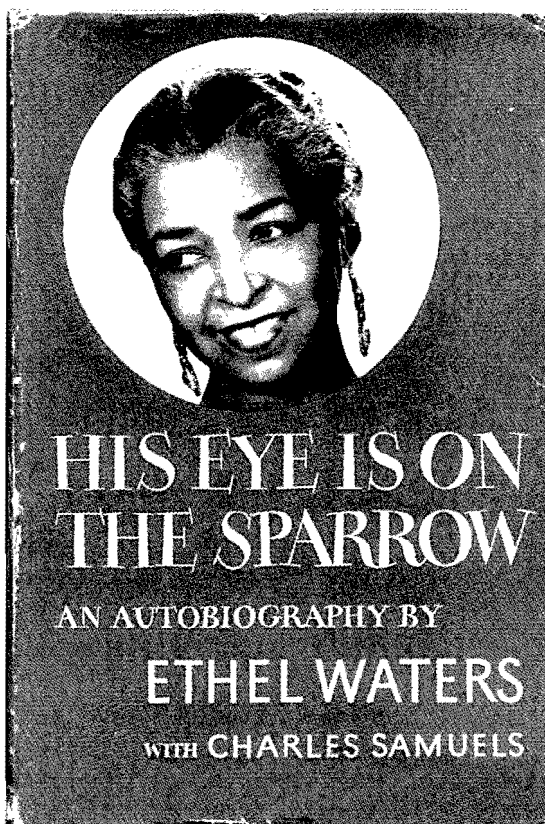


Photo courtesy of Between the Covers Rare Books, Inc.

he favored white women. And when Waters became the first black woman to star in a Broadway play, New York bohemia was at her feet.

Even with mink coats in her closet and song pluggers banging on her door, Ethel never lost sight of her humanity or her ability to do good in the world. She always considered herself an entertainer of the simple and common people.

BARNEY BIGARD was a direct link to some of the early New Orleans jazz musicians. He took clarinet lessons from Lorenzo Tio Jr. for 50 cents a session. (Born in 1884, Tio was playing clarinet professionally 14 years before Louis Armstrong came into the world. Some of Tio's other pupils included top New Orleans clarinetists Johnny Dodds and Jimmy Noone.) Later, when Bigard's career was up and running, he played with trumpeters Buddy Petit and Manuel Perez. As a kid, Bigard rolled cigars in his uncle's cigar factory, earning \$8 for every thousand he produced. His Uncle Emile, a violinist, led the Kid Ory Creole Ragtime Band because Ory couldn't read music and his uncle could. Bigard could read music too, but he didn't let it get in the way of understanding what jazz was all about. "It's not a time signature but just a feel."

Born in 1906, Albany Leon Bigard was a working musician his entire life. His memoir, *With Louis and the Duke* (edited by Barry Martyn. Macmillan, 1985), documents his 14 years with the Ellington orchestra and his on-and-off tenure with the Louis Armstrong All-Stars in the 1940s and 1950s.

Bigard started out playing music with neighborhood kids and following funeral parades. Like Armstrong before him, he was summoned to Chicago by the great King Oliver in 1924, and then recorded with Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. He was hired in 1927 by Duke Ellington, beginning an association that eventually would give Ellington fans a detailed look at the inner workings of the Duke's band. In his book,

Bigard discussed who was hired, why they were hired, and how the specific styles of musicians such as Jimmy Blanton and Ben Webster contributed to the Ellington sound and to the art form.

Besides adding his own distinctive sound to the band, Bigard also cowrote *Mood Indigo*, which is a story in itself. When Lorenzo Tio Jr. visited Bigard in New York, he handed Bigard a slip of paper with some musical notations on it. Bigard then worked on it with Ellington and some other players. Creative kismet occurred and a classic was born.

It took Bigard 28 years to collect his accrued royalties on *Mood Indigo*. He was not alone in having problems with royalties due on his musical contributions. Years later, Bigard was talking with Kid Ory, whose career had been rejuvenated by the Dixieland revival of the 1940s. Bigard brought up one of Ory's compositions, the classic *Muskrat Ramble*. When the business-challenged Ory stated that he received no income from the composition, Bigard marched him to the music publisher's office. There, Ory was astonished to discover, the accountants had been waiting for decades for him to come in and collect his royalty checks.

Working for Ellington was a never-ending grind of rehearsing, touring, recording and movie shorts. Bigard left the band in 1942, hoping to take it easy in Los Angeles and lead his own local gigs. But an offer

from Louis Armstrong in 1947 was too good to resist. He joined the Armstrong band and traveled the world.

AS THE BIG BAND ERA got under way, the jazz world changed drastically. It appeared that stability had become more prevalent in the lives of musicians who once had to balance playing their kind of music with paying the bills. This new music scene also produced a body of memoirs by the musicians who helped shape it. In the second part of this article, which will appear in a future issue of *Firsts*, Big Band musicians and the revolutionaries they incubated have their say. 