

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



COUNT BASIE

[This is the seventh article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Who's the kid who rewound movie reels on the projector, and operated the spotlight for vaudeville shows, at the Palace Theater in Red Bank, NJ? Bill Basie, that's who - - so he could get into the show free. He loved the entertainment.

Basie was born August 21, 1904. His father, Harvey, was a coachman and caretaker, and his mother, Lily Ann, was a laundress, taking in washing and ironing. Both fully supported his musical ambitions as he grew, giving him piano lessons and buying him the drum set he played in his school band. His love of the drums was short-lived, however. When he heard Sonny Greer, a local brilliant young drummer (who went on to play drums for Duke Ellington), he wisely decided that he should stick with the piano. It paid off, as Basie and Greer entered, and won first place in, a piano/drums competition in Asbury Park.

He quit high school in his junior year, gigged steadily in the area, then moved to New York City in 1924. Here, he met and was strongly influenced by the great stride piano players, James P. Johnson and Thomas "Fats" Waller. "Stride" is a jazz piano style where the left hand characteristically plays a single bass note on the first and third beats, and a chord on the second and fourth beats, often one or two octaves between them (fun to watch – difficult to do). He toured as a supporting musician, and found himself stranded in Kansas City in 1927 when the tour folded. Here, he worked his way up and landed with the popular Bennie Moten band. Bennie was the piano player, so Basie signed on as a staff arranger and substitute piano man.

Like many others, Moten's band was run as a "commonwealth band," where each member had his say in its operations. Basie became so popular that the band members ousted Moten as its leader and "elected" Basie to be their new leader, and changed the band's name to Count Basie and his Cherry Blossom Orchestra. "Count," Basie told reporters, was a tribute to his proclivity for disappearing to have a little fun with band member Eddie Durham (later, Glenn Miller's arranger for "In The Mood"). Moten would come looking for Basie, and say "Where is that no 'count rascal now?" Sadly, Moten died in 1935 while having his tonsils removed!

His first marriage failed early on during this time, yet he pursued his second wife, dancer Catherine Morgan, through a ten-year courtship. They married in 1942 and would spend thirty years together. During the Forties, he recorded many hits, including “One O’clock Jump,” “Jumpin’ At The Woodside,” and “Lester (tenor sax great, Lester Young) Leaps In.” In the Fifties, he struck gold again with “April In Paris,” L’il Darling,” and “Corner Pocket.” Most of his band arrangements were known as a “head,” an arrangement based on a simple melody or riff, played and committed to memory during rehearsals, and performed as just a background for his many soloists. Basie was an unassuming genius at pushing his “first chairs” into the spotlight and quietly supporting them at the piano.



In August, 1957, Esquire’s photographer Art Kane assembled fifty-seven jazz musicians, including Basie and Sonny Greer, in front of a Harlem brownstone for the magazine’s “Golden Age Of Jazz” article. A fun website for you, the reader, to visit is www.harlem.org, where you can interactively click on each musician for a small bio and links for more information.

Basie suffered a heart attack in 1976, but was not deterred from performing, even if it meant riding out on stage in a motorized wheelchair. Pancreatic cancer claimed this jazz giant eight years later at age 79, but his body of work, astoundingly large, lives on. I suggest "The Best of Count Basie" (MCA 2-4050), "April in Paris" (Verve 2641), and "The Atomic Basie" (Roulette 59025).

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as “Just Me 2”, a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic