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Letters

Though your knowledge of the record industry is diverse and relatively thorough, you seem to believe and perpetuate a particularly damaging myth -- that distributors somehow cheat the record labels they represent. In your April *Jazzletter* detailing the story of Mosaic's success, you state:

"The reasoning underlying this exercise in folly was that while they might not sell in vast quantities, at least Mosaic would receive the full retail price and the money would not vanish along the way through the prestidigitation of distributors and other virtuosos of the sticky finger."

Realistically, most labels can not dispense with the services performed by wholesale distributors and retail stores, and while Mosaic deserves plaudits for creating what they did via direct mail, it was truly a unique situation. Both Cuscuna and Lourie worked for Blue Note; Cuscuna still does. Because both founding partners had full-time jobs, Mosaic was able to be launched as a part-time endeavor; almost a hobby. Cuscuna and Lourie are expert Blue Note discographers, and with the recent passing of Alfred Lion, know more about Blue Note than any living person. More importantly, they had unimpeded access to the Blue Note/Pacific jazz master vault at a time when the parent EMI had little interest in jazz reissue projects on a grand scale and probably encouraged and welcomed Mosaic's emergence as an extra source of royalty revenue. The partners were able to start Mosaic as a labor of love and allow it the necessary five years in which to become a self-sustaining viable business. These unusual circumstances do not apply to most labels who cannot function without exposure in retail stores, which is provided to them by wholesale distributors.

I'm a former distributor, having owned and managed California Record Distributors in Los Angeles from 1957 to 1971. Among the many labels we distributed were the greatest independent jazz labels: Blue Note, Prestige, Riverside, Fantasy, Contemporary, Pacific Jazz, Atlantic, Mainstream, etc., and we always paid. California Record Distributors ceased to exist (we sold the business in 1969) but the name was since adopted by our current West Coast distributor, George Hocutt. He pays. Our New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Atlanta, Washington/Baltimore, Texas, Memphis, Kansas City, Hawaii, distributors pay. All of our current distributors pay.

There is no doubt that there were some world-class prestidigitators among independent distributors -- in New York, Miami, Chicago, New Jersey; in almost every major market. But they prestidigitated themselves out of the business, and the business is better off for it. Distributors who are in the business today are more financially stable, more ethical and pragmatic, better able to compete with major label distribution, and understand the needs of the labels they represent.

Let me try to explain a key circumstance under which a label can reasonably expect payment from a distributor. First and

foremost the "product" has to sell. There has to be in-store demand. Distributors will not pay unless product is selling and creates cash flow for them, nor can they be expected to. The mark-up they work on (15-20%) does not leave them much after overhead to pay for dead inventory. The unsold records do not disappear but are returned to the labels for credit. Most of the "horror stories" involve new labels with unrealistic expectations and unknown artists who do not sell at the retail level and consequently do not get paid as well as they expected. On the other hand, many new labels with hot emerging artists grew and prospered in the last five years, and in some cases were financed in whole or part by their distributors.

In short, it's time independent distributors got credit for what they do well.

Regards,

-- Ralph Kaffel, Berkeley, California

Ralph is president of the Fantasy complex of labels.

Birdland

I missed most of the fun on 52nd Street. When I was just out of high school in 1945, I visited New York for a week. I heard all the big bands playing in Broadway movie theaters, but didn't find the block on 52nd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues where all the small groups were playing. When I came to New York again in 1948 on a three-day pass from the Second Army Band at Fort Meade, Maryland, there were still a couple of jazz clubs left on 52nd Street. By 1950, when I moved to New York for good, most of the Swing Street clubs had switched to girlie shows, with only Jimmy Ryan's still featuring traditional jazz. The Hickory House interrupted its live jazz policy that year and installed a disc jockey in...de its famous oval bar. Later it went back to jazz, and I played there for several years with Marian McPartland's trio. But in 1950, Birdland was the best place in Manhattan to hear modern jazz. It became my musical alma mater.

When the army let me go in 1949, I went back to my home in the Seattle area but stayed there less than a year. Buzzy Bridgford, a drummer from Olympia, Washington, had spent some time on the music scene in New York. He took me under his wing in Seattle and convinced me that I should return to New York with him. Buzzy said, "If you want to be a musician, you've got to go where the music is." We crossed the country together on a Greyhound bus in January, 1950, and checked into the Hotel Bristol on 48th Street.

Forty-eighth Street was at the center of the musical action in Manhattan, but the Bristol was too expensive for more than a couple of nights. The \$8 daily rate would have quickly depleted the small stack of ten-dollar bills that, along with two suits, an overcoat and a valve trombone, were my total assets.

Buzzy moved to a Brooklyn Heights apartment with a girl friend and advised me to look for a cheap furnished room on the West side. So, on my second day in New York I went walking up Broadway, looking for a home.

Just north of 52nd Street I passed by the Birdland marquee. A sandwich board in front of the door announced that Charlie Parker and his quintet were playing there, opposite a house band of other famous jazz musicians. After memorizing the location, I circled around the neighborhood, looking for signs advertising rooms for rent. Such a sign was in a ground floor window at the corner of 53rd Street and Eighth Avenue, a five-story building next to the fire exit of the Gay Blades skating rink. (The rink was converted to a ballroom in late 1956, when Roseland, one jump ahead of the wrecker's ball, moved from its old 52nd Street location between Broadway and Seventh Avenue.)

The room rented for \$8 a week. That was its only virtue. The narrow, dim hallway was painted a slick, gloomy green and the stairway to my second floor room was rickety and steep. The pervasive smell of roach spray was overwhelming to me but not to the roaches. The room was just big enough for a sagging bed, a flimsy dresser, a threadbare rug, and a faded, shapeless easy chair. The single window overlooked a dark airshaft. I moved in because it was cheap, and only a block from Birdland.

I had a lot of time to kill every day until the club opened. I would walk over to the old Roseland building, where I'd stand around in Charlie's Tavern hoping to meet one of the three or four jazzmen I'd met through Buzzy. I couldn't afford to buy anything, but since I didn't drink, I didn't mind as long as Charlie didn't. Coffee was more my speed. A block south of Charlie's, on the Seventh Avenue side of 1650 Broadway, between Hansen's Drug Store and the Winter Garden Theater, was the B & G lunch counter, called "the bug and germ" by some of its denizens, that featured "the bottomless cup." A nickel would buy a cup of coffee and as many refills as I had the nerve to sit there and accept, putting off as long as possible my return to the cold weather outside.

Hansen's had a lunch counter and booths where night club comics and musicians gathered to swap stories. I'd sometimes order coffee and a slice of pound cake, which would entitle me to sit and listen for an hour or so. If I needed real sustenance, two or three nickels would buy enough food at the Horn and Hardart Automat on Broadway to stave off the worst hunger pangs. And there was Jimmy the Greek's lunch counter, tucked into the back entrance of the Brill Building, behind the Turf Restaurant. At one of Jimmy's six counter stools you could get a large plate of lentil soup and a slice of bread for fifteen cents, with all the ketchup you cared to add free of charge.

Eventually day would turn to evening. When eight p.m. finally arrived, Birdland started letting in its customers. I'd walk down the carpeted stairway, stop at a window on the landing to pay the 75 cents admission charge, and go on down the last half dozen steps into the club itself. At the desk at the bottom of the stairway customers were greeted by either

Drayton, the headwaiter, or Pee Wee Marquette, the midget master of ceremonies, a fixture of the place who is remembered by musicians with a certain nostalgic affection.

Birdland provided its clientele with three choices of location. At the right were tables directly in front of the bandstand, along the far left wall was the bar, and between the bar area and the left side of the bandstand, cordoned off by low wooden railings, was a section we called "the bleachers," with a long wooden bench at the rear and two or three rows of chairs in front of it. That section was also referred to by some as "the bull pen" or "the peanut gallery." At the tables there was a cover charge and a food and drink menu. You were expected to drink if you stood at the bar, but in the bleachers you were entitled to occupy a seat without further obligation, once having paid your admission.

The club had only been open a month when I arrived in New York, so the decor was still fresh and new. There were live birds in cages behind the bar, and the walls were covered with huge photo murals done by Herman Leonard in the high-contrast black and whites that were so characteristic of his work. Out of jet black backgrounds, the life-size images of Charlie Parker, Lennie Tristano, Dizzy Gillespie, etc. stood in stark illumination. Photographed trails of cigarette smoke were sharply lit against the blackness. The atmosphere the photo murals created was mysterious, mythical, modern. Just the thing for the home of modern jazz.

One of Birdland's assets was the radio wire that connected the club to listeners in twenty or thirty states. Once a week an hour of live music was broadcast over station WJZ and "Symphony Sid" Torin played modern jazz over that station six nights a week from midnight until 5:30 A.M., plugging the records of the current bands at Birdland and repeatedly announcing the location of "The Jazz Corner of the World." Sid's program originated from Birdland for a while, in a studio that had once been a checkroom. The Birdland broadcasts attracted a lot of business to the club.

In the back of my mind during my first weeks in New York was the awareness that my funds were finite, and that I would eventually have to find some sort of job, but I concentrated on Birdland until starvation forced me to think of other matters. For some time after I arrived the club's namesake, Charlie Parker himself, led a quintet that included Bud Powell, Roy Haynes, Tommy Potter, and Miles Davis. The band that played when Bird's quintet was off the stand had Max Roach, Curley Russell, and Al Haig in the rhythm section. The horn players were usually Howard McGhee, Sonny Stitt, Lucky Thompson, and J.J. Johnson. Other musicians would sit in from time to time. I heard Red Rodney, Charlie Ventura, Slim Gaillard, Alan Eager, Fats Navarro, Tiny Kahn, Art Blakey, Arthur Taylor, Buddy Rich, George Wallington, Tadd Dameron, Coleman Hawkins, Dizzy, Roy Eldridge, Charlie Rouse, Gene Ammons, Lee Konitz, Tony Scott, Milt Jackson, Kai Winding, Johnny Hodges, Milt Buckner, Ray Brown, John Simmons, Teddy Kotick, Thelonious Monk, John Lewis, Walter Bishop, Dick Hyman, and more.

Many other well-known musicians came to listen. Sitting in the bleachers I recognized Jo Jones, Lester Young, Count Basie, Serge Chaloff, Eddie Bert, Art Mardigan, Billy Eckstine, Flip Phillips, Al Cohn, Cliff Leeman, Pee Wee Erwin, Tiny Grimes, Cootie Williams. I couldn't get over being among all those musicians and hearing all that music. I was in heaven.

One night a buzz of recognition ran through the bleachers as Art Tatum slipped into a chair beside the bandstand right under the piano. He listened carefully to Bud Powell and was complimentary when asked how he liked Bud's playing. Then someone in the relief band asked him to sit in. As he slid onto the piano bench, those of us sitting behind him could see that, as if by accident, Art sat down on his left hand. It stayed there under his ample rear end for the entire set. He comped and took several brilliant solos, all with just his right hand.

Art may have been commenting on Bud's sparse use of his left hand, or he could have been reminding himself that stride was not being mixed with bop that year. Whatever his reason, he let everyone see that he could sit on one hand and still give the rest of the piano players a run for their money.

When the contents of my wallet got down to a single ten-dollar bill, I gave it to an employment agency that found me a day job feeding a hand press in a printing plant in the Bronx. Salary: \$30 per week. I still spent as many nights as I could afford at Birdland. I moved into a bigger room in a West Eighties brownstone with A.C. Bannister, a drummer who was studying painting at the Art Students' League. We split the \$12 weekly rent. After paying Lennie Tristano \$10 for a music lesson every week, I had about \$14 left for food, carfare, and Birdland. On nice days, by walking home from work through Harlem and Central Park, I saved the nickel subway fare. (The fare is now a dollar.) Ace and I cooked inexpensive meals on a hotplate in our room. Even so, I wasn't able to afford the admission at Birdland on a nightly basis.

That didn't keep me away from the place. When I lacked the price, I'd stand halfway down the stairs where I could hear the music even if I couldn't see the band. Between sets there were always musicians on the sidewalk outside. Sometimes the word would spread that a session was under way at Nola's Penthouse Studio, or at someone's loft, or at a bar somewhere in the Bronx. I would go anywhere to listen and hope for a chance to play.

I met Joe Lopes, now a well-known saxophonist in Los Angeles, while standing with two or three other fundless musicians in front of Birdland. Joe had just arrived in town. He asked if we were going downstairs to hear the music, and we said we didn't have the price. He was astonished. "You mean they don't let jazz musicians in free?" When we told him about the admission charge, he shook his head. "Come on," he said, "I'll get us in." He strode down the stairs, and we followed on his heels, wondering what kind of magic he had up his sleeve. Joe marched us past the ticket window and down the last flight of steps, where Pee Wee Marquette greeted him with, "Yes, Gentlemen?" and held out his hand for the tickets.

Joe brushed the hand aside and growled brusquely, "It's

cool!" Pee Wee looked astonished, but made no protest as we walked in and sat down in the bleachers. Joe sounded so absolutely sure that it was cool that I guess Pee Wee believed him.

Until I finally quit my job at the print shop and began to eke out a living with music, Birdland and Charlie's Tavern were the centers of my musical world. Birdland was where I heard the giants play, and Charlie's was where I met other musicians like myself, trying to survive.

I found a summer job in the Adirondacks where I learned to play the bass. As soon as I got back to New York I headed for Birdland, where Charlie Parker was breaking in his new group with strings. Everyone thought it was some sort of packaging gimmick, but Bird was really enjoying the possibilities of the new sound. He enjoyed the dignified attitude of the classical musicians he had hired, and became very grand himself as he conducted the introductions to the arrangements.

Some of my first New York gigs on string bass were Monday nights at Birdland. On Mondays the regular show took the night off and lesser known groups were hired. On one Monday I played there with George Wallington and Arthur Taylor. (Someone I'd played with at a jam session had recommended me to George.)

I knew George wrote hard tunes and played them at fast tempos, so I prepared myself as well as I could by listening to his records. On the big night I got there early and met Arthur. We set up and waited for George to arrive. He came in just before starting time and handed me a few sheets of manuscript paper. I looked them over and saw that he had written out the tunes and chord changes in tiny script with a red ballpoint pen. I used the lidless grand piano as a music stand, putting the music inside beside the strings.

George kicked off the first tune, *Liberty Bell*, at a very fast tempo. I had to follow his sketch carefully because the melody and the chords were unusual. Halfway through the first chorus, Pee Wee Marquette decided to improve the bandstand lighting. He turned on a bank of red floodlights overhead, which turned my music paper the same color as the notes. There was nothing to be seen on the paper but blank music staves! I don't know what I played for the next five minutes, but I'm sure it wasn't what George had in mind.

It took me a while to get booked into Birdland for a whole week. During most of 1952, I worked sporadically with Teddy Charles's trio, mostly out of town. Teddy taught me some good chords, gave me a lot of experience playing fast tempos without a drummer, got me a week's work with Slim Gaillard and a night with Dizzy Gillespie when they were caught shorthanded out of town, and introduced me to Jimmy Raney, who joined Teddy's trio for a while. Jimmy and I became good friends, and he took me with him when he went back to work with Stan Getz's quintet. I joined Stan at the Hi-Hat in Boston in October, 1952. Our next job was a week at Birdland.

I had been playing bass a very short time, so I was feeling a mixture of elation at being in on some wonderful music and trepidation about being the least experienced musician on the

band. As I pulled the cover off bass on the Birdland bandstand, I looked over toward the bar. There stood Oscar Pettiford talking to Charlie Mingus. A little farther down John Simmons chatted with Curley Russell. In the bleachers sat Teddy Kotick, Tommy Potter, and Al McKibbin. There seemed to be nothing but bass players, waiting to hear our first set.

I felt my knees weaken, but I said to myself, "Well, this is me. I can't play as well as any of these guys, so I'll just have to do the best I can. If that's not good enough, it's too late to do anything about it tonight." I got through the first number without being denounced as a charlatan by the assembled bassists. And we did have a good band. I stopped sweating and relaxed a little. I never faced any audience tougher than that one, so I guess it was good to experience that kind of extreme pressure all at once and get it over with.

In the summer of 1952, Birdland made a deal with Count Basie to book his band several times a year. It was Basie's first appearance in New York with a big band in four years. To make the sound of eighteen musicians a little less overwhelming in the small room, Morris Levy, the owner, hired someone to redecorate, adding more sound-absorbent surfaces. Curtains were hung behind the bandstand and Herman Leonard's photo murals were replaced by acoustic panels. Then someone cut the photo murals into a lot of geometric shapes, tacked them here and there on the acoustic panels, tinted parts of them with pink and yellow shellac, and connected them with lines of colored twine, making a grotesque "modern art" collage of the chopped up photographs.

When Leonard heard what had been done to his murals, he threatened to sue. "I don't mind if you take them down," he said, "but you can't take my work and mutilate it like that." Rather than go to court, Morris Levy ordered the photos removed and a little later replaced them with framed portraits of jazz stars painted on black velour.

One afternoon I took my bass through the back entrance to Birdland for a rehearsal with the Terry Gibbs Quartet. We were appearing opposite the Basie band. Tucked behind a row of garbage cans in the alleyway, I saw one of the photo cutouts that had been discarded. It was a life-size head and shoulder shot of Charlie Parker wearing a plaid suit jacket and a striped bow tie, playing with closed eyes and a slight frown of concentration. I couldn't believe my good luck. I hurried down to the bandstand with my bass, ran back upstairs, and stuffed the photo, mounted on heavy cardboard, into the Model A Ford I had borrowed from a friend to transport my bass. That picture has been on the wall of every home I've had since then.

During one redecoration of the club, someone sold Morris Levy on installing a "stereo" sound system. A pair of speakers was hung, one at each side of the bandstand. Only the front microphone was connected to both of them. The piano mike went only to the left speaker, the bass mike only to the right one. When more mikes were added for large groups they were split between the two channels. The music sounded balanced to anyone sitting at a table between the two speakers,

but at the bar and in the bleachers only the left one could be heard. Since the speaker that carried the bass mike was across the bandstand from where bass players usually stood, it took me a while to discover that whenever I played a low A, something in that speaker enclosure vibrated in sympathy, causing a loud buzzing noise. When I reported the problem to Morris Levy, he said, "Don't play that note."

A few years ago, Connie Kay and I were playing at Struggles in New Jersey. We began reminiscing about Birdland. The conversation inevitably turned to Pee Wee Marquette, an indelible part of everyone's memory of "The Jazz Corner of the World." Pee Wee -- William Clayton Marquette, three feet nine inches tall -- was usually nattily dressed in a brown pin-stripe vested suit and a floral tie or a dark green velvet suit with a large bow tie. On special occasions he wore tails with a white tie. His suits were fairly zoot, with his beltline at his armpits, his trousers pleated and tightly cuffed, and his box-back jackets featuring extra wide lapels. A long silver key-chain usually hung at his side.

Pee Wee wore one of two facial expressions while performing his duties as master of ceremonies: a lofty disapproving frown that indicated the importance of his office, and an exaggerated toothy smile that he usually reserved for soliciting tips. Not just from customers: Pee Wee expected money from every bandleader who worked at Birdland, and since he announced the name of each musician before each set, on payday he let it be known that he expected a dollar per musician for the publicity.

When Terry Gibbs first led a group at Birdland he was told that Pee Wee expected to be taken care of. Feeling embarrassed about offering him money and fearing Pee Wee might be offended by such crassness, Terry bought him a nice pair of cufflinks and had them gift wrapped. When Terry gave him the package at the club, Pee Wee said suspiciously, "What's this?" He opened it, and frowned. "Cufflinks!" he snorted loudly, pushing the box back into Terry's hand. "Man, I got cufflinks! Don't give me no cufflinks, GIVE ME THE BREAD!"

When Bob Brookmeyer took a quintet into Birdland, he declined to tip Pee Wee and instructed his musicians to do the same. Pee Wee retaliated by refusing to announce the band. Morris Levy, the boss, finally laid down the law. Pee Wee had to announce the musicians, tip or no tip. His subsequent announcements of Brookmeyer's group dripped with disdain.

Pee Wee had one of the first adjustable butane cigarette lighters on the market. He used it to light the large cigars he sometimes smoked, but he carried it mainly as a service to patrons at Birdland. To compensate for his height he would adjust the lighter for maximum flame length. It was an unnerving experience in a dark night club to put a cigarette in your mouth and have a two-foot flame suddenly shoot up from below your waist, with Pee Wee grinning hopefully at the other end.

Pee Wee's voice was high and brassy. Though he did his best to enunciate carefully, he frequently slipped into the dialect of his birthplace, Montgomery, Alabama. He would

climb onto the Birdland bandstand, pull the microphone stand down to his chin and shout: "AND NOW, LAYDUHS AND GENTLEMEN, BIRDLAND, THE JAZZ CORNAH OF THE WORLD, IS PROUD TO PRESENT, THE ONE AND ONLAH...." After laboriously naming the bandleader and all the musicians and asking for a "large round of applaw" for the band, he would climb back down to floor level, admonishing the band in a piercing aside that carried to the far corners of the room, "All right, now, men, let's get right up heah! We don't want no lulls 'roun' heah! No lulls!"

Pee Wee always left the mike adjusted to his own height, that is about three feet from the floor. When Dizzy Gillespie worked the club, he would sometimes crouch behind the large pillar at the end of the bandstand until the end of the announcement, then walk onstage on his knees to speak into the microphone right where Pee Wee had left it.

Pee Wee often had trouble with the names he announced. He usually consulted his notes, but that didn't prevent him from announcing Dinah Washington as Ruth Brown on one occasion. Most musicians counted themselves fortunate if he merely made their names unrecognizable. Teddy Kotick would grind his teeth with fury every time Pee Wee announced Charlie Parker's quintet: "...and on the bass, Teddy KO-TEX!"

With the Stan Getz quintet, Pee Wee did fine with "on the piANO, Duke JOEdan, on the GIT-tah, JIMmuh RAYnuh, on the BASS, BEAL CROW," and then, frowning at the piece of paper in his hand, he continued, "and on the DRUM..." He puzzled a moment over Frank Isola's name. We whispered the pronunciation to him, and Pee Wee continued with supreme confidence, "and on the DRUM, ...PHIL BROWN!" Phil had been Stan's drummer at a previous appearance at Birdland.

Connie Kay told me, "That little motherfucker was the cause of me changing my name." Connie's natal name was Kirnon. He played at Birdland frequently with Lester Young's quintet. When I was working there with Pres, Pee Wee never could say my name right. In the back room, Pres would laugh and say, 'He's fuckin' up your name again, Lady K!' I finally told Pee Wee just to use the initial, and I stayed with it."

Lester, who wanted everything peaceful and pretty, often found Pee Wee a little much to take. Once when Pee Wee gave him a hard time, Lester assailed him in his own mysterious fashion.

"You're no midget," he accused. "You're a motherfuckin' dwarf!" Later Pres refined the insult, disdainfully referring to Pee Wee as "a half-a-motherfucker."

The Basie band was once part of a Birdland jazz tour that used Pee Wee as emcee. Benny Powell, then a member of Basie's trombone section, played me a tape of one of the concerts on that tour. As the applause waned following a number, Pee Wee's voice began with strident importance: "And NOW, ladies and gentlemen, befo' the band play this next NUMBAH, I just want to SAY, how HAPPY we all are to BE heah in, uh... in, uh..." His voice dwindled. Loud whispers from the saxophone section prompted, "Topeka...Top-eka!" Pee Wee surged back to full volume:

"Heah in PoTEEka!"

Pee Wee's tongue often fell prey to spoonerisms and malapropisms. He once announced the presence in Birdland's audience of Mr. Marlo Brandon. Another night he announced that Duke Ellington had won the *Down Beat* poll, and that "the man from *Down Beat* magazine will now step up here to award the PLAGUE to Duke Ellington!"

After a few years absence from the bandstand at Birdland I returned for a week in 1961 with Quincy Jones' big band. Pee Wee met me at the door when I arrived with my bass. "Beal Crow! You used to work here in the old days! With Stan Getz!" He talked about Stan's quintet, and as he named the other members of the group, somehow guitarist Jimmy Raney's name became embedded in his mind. When he announced Quincy's band, he included in the roster, "and Jimmah RAY-nah on the bass!" I asked the other musicians not to say anything to Pee Wee so we could see how long he'd continue with the mistake.

At the end of the week I was still being announced on every set as Jimmy Raney. As I got off the bandstand after the next-to-last set, Jerome Richardson, the band manager, was ready with the payroll in the back room, and he handed me my money. I went out into the house and sat down at a table with some friends. Soon Pee Wee began rounding up the band for payday.

He came by my table twice to announce, "Say, Jimmah, Jerome's paying off in the back room." I'd say, "Okay, Pee Wee," and go back to my conversation. It was nearly time for the last set, and Pee Wee was getting worried. "Say, Jimmah, Jerome wants to see you in the back room!" I said, "That's okay, Pee Wee, he already saw me." Pee Wee's eyes went round with concern. "Well, you know, when he sees you, YOU SEE ME!"

I pretended innocence. "What for?" I asked. Pee Wee began to fawn. "Now, Jimmah, you remembah in the old days, you always took care of old Pee Wee at the end of the week!" I leaned across the table and looked him in the eye. "What's my name?"

Pee Wee's face was a study in confusion. He gaped at me for a minute, and then trotted over to Drayton, the headwaiter. There was a whispered exchange between them, then Pee Wee hurried back to where I was sitting. He was all smiles. "Beal Crow! Why'd you let me keep saying the wrong name?" To correct matters, and to earn his dollar, he hurried to the bandstand. He announced Quincy and the entire band, saving me for last. Then he gave me the full treatment: "...AND, on the BASS, one of the GREATest BASS playahs of ALL TIME, a musician of GREAT renown, the GREAT, the ONE and ONLAH, ...BEAL...CROW!"

As Pee Wee left the bandstand, I hurried to the mike before the rest of the band took their places. "Ladies and gentlemen," I said, extracting a dollar from my wallet, "I would now like to present this one dollar bill, legal tender, United States currency, to our inimitable master of ceremonies, Pee Wee Marquette. Not because he has earned it. Not because he deserves it in any way. But simply because he asked me for it."

I yanked rhythmically on the ends of the dollar bill as I held it up to the microphone, making a loud popping noise over the speakers. Pee Wee hastened between the tables and chairs, his hand stretched high over his head. "Don't put your business in the street!" he cried as he snatched the bill from my fingers and popped it into his pocket.

When jazz audiences began to thin out in the 1960s, Oscar Goodstein, who managed Birdland for Morris Levy, decided to try to tap a different audience. He tried a few blues singers without much success, and caused great confusion for a time by only opening on weekends. Customers and cab drivers who arrived during the week and found the doors locked spread the rumor that the club had gone out of business. In the Spring of 1965 Goodstein dropped jazz completely. He booked rock and rhythm-and-blues bands into Birdland, but business never picked up again. The club closed for good in July of that year.

The closing stunned many Birdland alumni. It was like hearing that Yale had gone out of business. The club had presented the major artists in the jazz world at affordable prices for fifteen years, educating and delighting jazz musicians and fans. Though the pay was low, the hours long, the band room ridiculously small, and the piano battered to death, the music was wonderful. Bird brought his best music there, as did Dizzy, Miles, Tristano, Basie, Mulligan, Blakey, Monk, Bud, Sarah, Billie, Dinah, hundreds more.

Some time after Birdland closed, Pee Wee Marquette reappeared a couple of blocks down Broadway at the Hawaii Kai, a Polynesian restaurant in the basement of the Winter Garden Theater building. Dressed in a diminutive doorman's uniform, he greeted the customers there for years, until the restaurant closed this Spring. He usually gave short shrift to anyone who wanted to reminisce about Birdland, but he reportedly offered to help Clint Eastwood in his reconstruction of the club when the movie "Bird" was being prepared. Eastwood's Birdland was unrecognizable to anyone who remembers the original, but he did include a short scene in his movie in which a black midget emcee speaks a sentence or two over the nightclub microphone.

Evidently Pee Wee wasn't consulted or remunerated. He is said to be highly displeased.

-- BC

The Bill Potts Band

A record you won't find in your record store is *555 Feet High* (that's the height of the Washington Monument is) by the Bill Potts big band. It has fine ensemble playing, some great solos, and the exuberantly fresh writing of its leader.

Bill Potts is better known in the profession than to the public. He almost acquired a big name when he won some awards for his *Jazz Soul of Porgy and Bess* in 1959, a beautiful album that featured the cream of New York's jazz players. And then Bill slipped from national sight, returning to the Washington DC area whence he had come, writing charts for

shows and various "artists" who were beneath the dignity of his talent, though sometimes turning out charts for Doc Severinsen and the *Tonight Show* band. For the last ten years Bill has been teaching music at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, which has given him the satisfaction of training some excellent young jazz players, three of whom are in this band.

The big band is a sound that just won't go away, first because musicians love to play in big bands and second because there continues to be a market for such music, for all the synthesizers and confusion about what jazz really is caused by the largely sterile efforts to fuse rock and jazz. So for long time musicians who have had to make their bread in other ways have voluntarily come together in "kicks bands" to make this kind of music. Frank Capp and Nat Pierce organized one such band, Juggernaut, in Los Angeles. The movement has extended beyond the borders of the United States. Two of the finest such bands were the brilliant mixture of European and American players led jointly by Kenny Clarke and Francis Boland, and the largely-Canadian (there were a couple of Americans in it) band led by Rob McConnell, called the Boss Brass. In a class with all of these is the Bill Potts band, which has some special merits of its own.

It is made up largely of young players. This is not necessarily a virtue, but when the players are good, and the bunch Potts has assembled are far more than that, the enthusiasm of youth can make a band burn, and this band does. The personnel is a mixture of civilians and musicians from various of the military bands stationed around Washington. The band is large -- it has six trumpets (with a split lead) and five trombones.

There's an extraordinary young trumpet player in this band, Vaughan Nark, who came up as a protege of Dizzy Gillespie. The next time you hear someone say that jazz is dying -- or dead -- tell him to go and listen to Tom Harrell or to Vaughan Nark. Nark vaguely reminds me of someone, but I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's Fats Navarro. Or Sonny Berman. The comparison is only a compliment, and he is firmly his own man. His playing has a soaring quality. And he has astounding chops. He has a vocabulary of smears and glisses that puts me in mind of Clark Terry. And he has speed combined with clarity to a dazzling degree. He plays a flugelhorn solo on an original called *Brazilville* that is hard to believe. It should be noted that he doesn't play only a jazz chair. He's one of the lead trumpets. And that wouldn't tell you as much if the album had been made in a series of sessions. It was done in a single session in a day. So this young man has an iron lip.

The album consists mostly of originals, though it includes great charts on *C Jam Blues* and Jelly Roll Morton's *Dead Man's Blues*.

As is so often the case with good music, this album has dreadful distribution. If you want it, send ten bucks to Bill Potts, 201 S. Washington Street, Rockville MD 20850. That covers postage as well.

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