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Nat and the News

Thank you all for the kind words about the Nat Cole piece.

When I talked of the inaccuracies that creep into writings and then replicate themselves in future works that draw on them as sources, I did not realize that I had fallen into the trap myself, and not for the first time. I said that Billy Strayhorn disliked Nat Cole's recording of *Lush Life*. I picked that up from David Hajdu's biography of Strayhorn. Strayhorn *liked* the Cole version; it was the John Coltrane performance he disliked.

I also thank you for the response to *A Tragedy of Errors*, about the decline of journalism, especially television journalism. Doug Ramsey promptly sent me the following piece by Rich Robertson, written for the *Arizona Republic*. Rich Robertson is a former city editor and investigations team leader for that newspaper and investigative reporter for Channel 5 (KPHO) and Channel 12 (KPNX) in Phoenix. He is now owner of Robertson Investigations and Consulting in Phoenix.

I thought you would find it interesting. And important. It is reprinted with the permission of Mr. Robertson, who said in his note, "I'd be pleased to have it reprinted. Maybe the rising tide of voices will eventually be heard."

I wonder what would happen if we all began writing letters to the news directors of our local television stations to complain about the quality of the coverage and the vapid interjections of the celluloid dolls who say things like, "That's a lesson we all can learn . . . What a heart-breaking story . . . . That's good advice there, Jim . . . . That should be an inspiration to all of us . . . . You can't be too careful . . . ."

And ask such questions as, "How did you feel when you learned those pit bulls had killed your little girl?"

The Wayward News

By Rich Robertson

Phoenix — When I told my television station's news director a few months ago that I intended to end nearly 30 years in print and broadcast journalism, I borrowed a line from a former British minister's resignation letter. I said I wanted to spend more time with my principles.

I don't think he understood. How could anyone walk away from a job that many people would kill to have?

Pay and benefits were certainly not an issue. And I thoroughly enjoyed and admired the people I worked with. The public recognition was nice too.

But somewhere along the line, journalism's values (or, more accurately, what journalism values) had diverged from mine.

I'm not alone. A new study by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that four in 10 journalists, both print and broadcast, now admit to working in an environment that increasingly asks them to avoid "newsworthy" stories to benefit the financial interests of their "news" organizations. These journalists believe market pressures are pushing them toward the salacious and sensational and away from the complicated and important.

I was among the four in 10 journalists.

I began feeling I was doing a disservice to the TV audience by telling them only what was happening rather than why. I felt it was unfair to compress complex subjects into a few breathless seconds or inches. I was embarrassed when my stories were so often oversold, or just wrong, in "promos" and "teases." I was frustrated that news is defined as being whatever is urgent rather than what is "important."

"Breaking news" becomes the most important news, even if there's no news to report.

I cringed that every story had to be "shocking" or some kind of superlative, even if it wasn't: "a parent's worst nightmare," "a story you must see," "an exclusive interview" (with someone who is constantly being interviewed).

I once suggested to a news manager that we program the Alt-H keys on the computer keyboard to automatically insert hype into every story.

Television, in particular, is increasingly in the business of marketing itself, not the news. The primary criterion is that a story be promotable. In fact, story promos usually get more air time than the stories themselves.

For example, I was heartened one morning a while back to hear a group of news managers discussing doing a story about the local fallout of the Asian economic crisis. The electronics industry, in particular, could be affected, leading to lost jobs and distressed families. It was an important local story.

But the discussion fell silent when one producer asked, "How do we avoid the glaze factor?" Those are the code

words for "It's boring." Everyone looked at each other and shrugged.

"Well; how about the double murder?" someone else offered. They were off and running.

I've always known that news is a business. You have to have readers and viewers to be able to attract advertisers who pay the bills, including your salary. But we tried to separate ourselves by saying that if we do good journalism, readers and viewers and therefore advertisers will come.

That is no longer true. Now, journalists are forced to pander to the same gawker reflex that causes traffic to snarl near car wrecks. We want viewers and readers to slow down to see us, so we give them a whole bunch of car wrecks and other forms of mayhem.

Now, stories are "tested" with random phone calls asking people if they'd prefer a story about "Deadly Germs on Your Child's Playground Equipment" to "Welfare Policies and the Poor." Public policy always loses to that kind of analysis.

It isn't just television. Newspapers, radio, and Web-based news services are suffering from many of the same pressures cited in the Pew Center study.

Newspapers have pared their staffs or shifted them away from fulfilling a socially critical but apparently financially unprofitable role of public watchdog.

Not too many years ago, there were full-time reporters from at least three different news organizations covering the Maricopa County courts, Phoenix City Hall and the city's police department. Today, only two of these beats have full-time print reporters. In their place is a cadre of government-paid information officers. News organizations simply publish or air what they're told by the agencies.

As the pressures increase, journalists, both individually and organizationally, have little time to think, let alone be thoughtful.

Get on the air or in print. Move on to the next story.

I'm not suggesting that all news shows become the Bloomberg Report or be like demolition derby. Somewhere, there's a balance.

Do the crime/accident story, but don't bludgeon it with "team coverage" and reaction sound bites from people who always say they are shocked it happened in their quiet neighborhood.

Give the headlines so that viewers and readers have a sense of what's happening in their community, but devote time to the important topics.

"Important" is more difficult. It's hard to take pictures of it; it's harder to understand and then explain it. And it's hardest of all to make it compelling.

But that's what professional journalists are supposed to be able to do.

It won't happen unless media companies commit to it. Not abdicate it.

We Are Like Atlas

Part One

The Cab Calloway band outlasted the big-band era but finally, in 1948, it too broke up.

"Now I had a problem," Milt Hinton said in his deep Mississippi accent. It is a Gulf accent, related to that of New Orleans, and, for reasons I have never fathomed, that of Brooklyn. "Rehearsed" is pronounced *rehoised.*

"I'd been in Cab Calloway's band 16 years and I thought it was going to last forever, and it almost *did.* I didn't know New York. I'd been traveling. I was busy all those years, recording with Teddy Wilson, Billie Holiday, making records on the side. New York was doing 75 percent of all recording in America. This was before Motown, Nashville, and all that. We *invented* the TV jingle in New York. And here I am, I don't know anybody, and I'm out of work now.

"I'm walking down the street one day, and I run into Jackie Gleason. I knew Jackie Gleason when he couldn't get arrested. I worked clubs in Jersey when I had to buy him a drink. Bullets Durgom was his manager. And I knew Bullets when he was a song-plugger at the Cotton Club. He'd bring songs to Cab. So Bullets and Jackie Gleason are walking down the street. It was around 55th Street." Milt has an uncanny memory for exact locations and dates.

"Jackie says, 'Milt Hinton, where've you been?'

"I said, 'Nowhere.'

"Jackie said, 'Bullets, we're doing this record date tomorrow, I can use Milt.' But they ain't used no black guys in any of those big string bands. You know that.

"Bullets says, 'Jackie, we've got a bass player.'

"Jackie says, "Yeah? Well we've got two now.'

"I went to the date the next day, and everything was wonderful."

"Were they the string dates with Bobby Hackett?" I asked.

"That's right," Milt said. "I made every one of them. It was called *Music for Lovers Only.* The problem wasn't the musicians. The powers that be were the problem. Nobody had ever bothered to change things. I showed up, I've got a good bass, and I can play and I can read music. We had 65 men there. And all the big contractors were there. They heard me play, and the string players were interested in my bass, a Mateo Groffella, made in 1740. Wonderful bass. And so the guys all came over to me and were talking to me and the contractors took my name down.

"And that's when I got into the recording business. I did *Funny Girl* with Barbra Streisand, I worked with Percy Faith. And it all started with Gleason.

"At that time Jack Lesberg was the busiest bass player in New York. He was doing *Lucky Strike Hit Parade* and he was doing a CBS radio show, Galen Drake, on Saturday

morning. Bernie Leighton was the pianist, Jack Lesberg was the bassist. They changed the rehearsal time of *Lucky Strike Hit Parade*, so Jack Lesberg couldn't make the show and he recommended me. In radio it was *cool* . . . ."

"Yeah, you were invisible."

"Yeah!" Milt laughed. "Invisible. I got the show, and it paid 90 dollars. It was manna from heaven. Jack Lesberg gave me that show. Then I did the *Woolworth Hour* with Percy Faith, radio show on Sunday afternoon. Percy was a beautiful man. That was the beginning of life for me. By now I've made more records than any bass player living or dead.

"Pretty soon we were the New York rhythm section: Hank Jones, piano, Barry Galbraith, guitar, Osie Johnson, drums, and me. And we dealt in service. We want to make you sound good. We'll give you anything you want. We worked 10 to 1, 2 to 5, and 7 to 10, every day. We made all those Eddie Fisher records when he was hot."

One of Milt's countless bassist friends is Bill Crow. Bill commented:

"After those Jackie Gleason dates, the New York contractors were lining up to book him for dates. At the height of the recording boom in the '50s and '60s, Milt and Osie Johnson were the rhythm team of choice around New York. Many contractors waited to get their availability before booking studio time.

"Milt had a helper running basses to different recording studios around town in advance, so he could hurry from one date to the next and have an instrument waiting for him. He took every date seriously, no matter how inconsequential the music. On the simplest jingle date, Milt would listen critically to the playback and work to improve his part on the next take. He would help you find gigs, would send you in to sub for him in important situations, and would share anything he knew about basses, technique, lore, and the ins and outs of the music business. It was his kindness that connected me with the conductor who hired me for two of the major Broadway shows I played for 11 years.

"I treasure his friendship."

To which John Clayton added:

"Milt is our maestro. He is the leader who has taught us, first, how to be loving, compassionate human beings. *And* he has helped us set our goals by supplying us with such a high level of bass playing."

All of this reminded me of something Oscar Peterson once said to me. Oscar said: "Bass players are very protective of each other. I would find it almost unbelievable if you told me you'd ever heard a bass player say something about another bass player that wasn't good. If you look at the history of the instrument in jazz, you can see why. The public never used to notice bass players. They were always the guys who came into the group and were given one order, 'Walk!' Once in a while they'd be thrown a bone, like, 'Walk — one chorus solo.' Finally they managed to break away, because of the proficient players who came along."

I told Milt that Oscar had said you'd never hear one bass player say anything against another.

"Never!" Milt said emphatically, and laughed. "It's like family. You might have nine or ten brothers and sisters, but your Mama is your Mama. We come one to a customer in jazz. There's only one bass player in a band. I'm the best bass player of any band I'm in. And I don't have to worry about playing first or second. Saxophone players, this one wants to play first, this guy doesn't want to play second, this guy don't want to play third, and they put each other down. We don't have that problem. We *share work*. I just told you what Jack Lesberg did for me. We've always done that. We still do it."

"Who are your favorite bass players?" I asked, knowing full well that he would never say.

"All of them. I'm older than most of them that are living. And they all revere me, they treat me like I'm their father. It makes me feel great. I saw this great accomplishment. I saw Ray do what he did. Ray Brown to me is the guru of bass players. He sacrificed. He's a quarterback, he knows music, he's a finished musician, a pretty good piano player. He dedicated himself to playing that bass.

"I saw Oscar Pettiford do that. It was a natural thing; he was not a schooled musician. I saw him first time in St. Paul, Minnesota. I went to a nightclub when I was with Cab Calloway's band, 1937, to be exact. And this kid is playin' his ass off in there. I said, 'Holy cow!' and I introduced myself. Ben Webster was with me. I said, 'We're down at the Orpheum Theater. Come down tomorrow. I want the guys to hear you.' He came down, and all the guys heard him. All through our lives we were friends.

"I saw Richard Davis when he was right out of high school, when he came to New York. He looked me up. And look what he's done.

"I'd invite the new young bass players to come to my home. Some of them stayed at our house. We'd make a big pot of chicken and rice and some chili. If there was a gig, I'd recommend them. So it's gone like that, and we keep that going. I gave Bryan Torff his first job.

"There's no color to that.

"Scott LaFaro was fantastic. When he was killed, I finished a recording gig with Stan Getz at Webster Hall for him. He was amazing! I saw his great progress. The same thing when Blanton came along. The harmonic expansion, the solos, and still maintaining the prime requisite of a bass player, which is to support. I've seen Richard Davis do that, then Ron Carter, and Rufus Reid. John Clayton is fabulous. He's won awards in classical bass *and* jazz.

"We have a Milt Hinton Scholarship for bass players. We've got enough money to give three, four scholarships a

year, on the interest, without even touching the money. They submit a tape, and we sit down, people like Bill Crow, Jack Lesberg, Ron Carter, and listen to all these tapes, and decide who is deserving of this scholarship. I don't even get a vote unless there's a tie. We allocate the scholarships according to that.

"On my eightieth birthday, a hundred bass players went down to Lincoln Center and played *Happy Birthday.*"

That was ten years ago. Milt's ninetieth was celebrated June 13, 2000, with a concert at the Danny Kaye Theater. Every bass player you ever heard of was there, excepting those who simply couldn't make it.

There is no more revered figure on any instrument than Milton John Hinton, almost universally known as the Judge. The nickname came from the punch line of a joke even he could not remember, but he started greeting friends with "Good morning, Judge," or "Good evening, Judge," but with time musicians began applying the sobriquet to him. Yet he is the least judgmental of men, this most generous man, this miracle of a man, this giver of knowledge, this phenomenal musician. No other bassist — and only one other musician, namely Benny Carter — has comparably transcended the eras of jazz, comfortable in all of them, since the days when Louis Armstrong put the refining touches to the definition of this music in Chicago in the 1920s.

"I was born June 23, 1910, in Vicksburg, Mississippi," Milt said. "It was the era of blacks migrating from the south. It's a most interesting era that people seem historically to overlook.

"My grandmother was a slave on a plantation. At Emancipation, you took the name of the overseer, the man who was in charge of the plantation. And the man who was in charge was named Carter, so she took the name of Hetty Carter. She married a man named Matt Robinson. He was a pretty enterprising sort of a guy, and he got a horse and a buggy and started what we call a hack, to carry people around. He did *very* well. He had thirteen children. My mother was one. Most of 'em died.

"My grandmother was the idol of my entire life, because this lady had the fortitude, the strength, the know-how to survive. Her last child was born five months after her husband was dead. He had dropsy, they called it in those days. You can imagine a black woman in the south with nine or ten kids and no husband.

"She got a job working for a white family, a Jewish family named Baer, that had a department store. They liked her and gave her three and a half dollars a week, which was a good salary. They gave her *carte blanche* to take care of the house, to cook, wash, iron, buy all the food. And she bought enough food for them *and* her children. She cooked for them, and she had enough left for her children to come to the back door and get the food and take the dirty clothes back to the shack they lived in, put the dirty clothes in that big pot out the back with a fire under it to boil those clothes, and the children could eat while she finished doing what she had to do in the house.

"She went to this man Baer, who seemed to like her very much, and she asked him if he would permit her to open a little stand down by his store. People coming to work in the morning needed coffee. She set up her coffee stand, where she sold a cup of coffee and two biscuits for a nickel. And she augmented her salary like that to keep her kids going.

"My grandmother learned to read. She was very religious, of course. She led us all to dignity and morality and peace. She didn't want any of her children to even argue among themselves. She lived until I was in Cab Calloway's band. She made a hundred and three years, so I got the first-hand information about this.

"She told me about smallpox and other diseases. They didn't care about black people with smallpox, and the black community was just ravaged. They quarantined her shack with her children in it and she couldn't even go home to help them. She'd have to push food under the gate and they'd come and get it. She took one of my uncles, who was a baby, to what they called a pest house. It was supposedly like a hospital for black people, and they didn't even have any water. She said they told her the water was no good. People were laying there, dying, and drinking out of the urinals because they had no water.

"Do you know what a dray is? It's a two-wheel cart. Black people were being piled up on a dray like cord wood, and still groaning, and they would take them to the graveyard because there was no hope for them. And she survived all that. She had pockmarks in her face, and most of her children did. My mother escaped that. Of the 13 children, there were five left after that great scourge, my mother, two sisters, and two brothers.

"The boys never had a chance to go to school. The three girls got to go to school. My mother seemed to be the most militant of the three. She got a fairly decent education in some kinda way.

"There was a piano in our house. She must have got the Baer family to let her have a piano, and God knows what she must have paid for it. My mother got to learn how to play piano. She was in the church, and choir rehearsals were held in our house. The two boys, my uncles, would go down to the railroad tracks when the trains came by and make faces so the engineers would call, 'Little black bastards,' and throw coal it at them. They would put it in a sack and take it downtown and sell it. That's how they made their survival.

"The house sat up on stilts so the Mississippi could run under it. There were bayous in the sunken part of the land. The Mississippi River starts up in Minnesota. When it gets

down to Louisiana, it's going with such force that it pushes the bay water 90 miles out to sea. And when it backs up, all sorts of sea animals, sea urchins, come back with it into these bayous, and when it recedes, they can't get away. We had big sea turtles and fish from the ocean. My uncles and I would go down there and get 'em and sell 'em. There were water moccasins, and they were deadly poison. I remember skinny dipping there. You'd hit the top of the water and they would go away from you. Kids didn't have any better sense. But we survived. That's the kind of thing we did.

"By 1910, the year I was born, the minister in this church my mother was organist of, was preaching to the black folks: 'There's no future for you here. Conditions are terrible, they're not going to get any better. So, young people, try to get out of here, try to get North, where you get opportunities to be somebody.' So the young people were finding ways to get out to Chicago, which was the center of the United States. And it needed all kinds of unskilled labor, which the black folks had. They needed porters in the railroad stations, redcaps, they needed laborers in the stockyards. There was a big strike among white laborers in the stockyards, and in order to break the strike, they sent down south to get a lot of black laborers to come up and take these places. And the ones who could get away got to Chicago. And instead of making three and half a week, they were making 20 or 25 dollars a week."

I pointed out that Hank Jones too was from Vicksburg. His family went to Pontiac, Michigan.

"Hank's younger'n I am," Milt said, "and I didn't know him in Vicksburg. I met him a lot later."

"And who was your father?" I asked.

"My father was an African, a Monrovian bushman. Missionaries brought his family here to educate them. This was in 1900. The kids went to work, but they couldn't stand all that biasedness and the conditions they had been put under in the South. My father married my mother and they had a baby, but he couldn't stand it here and he went back to Africa when I was three months old. My mother's brothers, my uncles, told me about him. I was 30 years old the first time I saw my father."

When Milt was about six, he saw something he could not, would not, ever forget.

His Uncle Matt was taken to a hospital after an automobile accident. Milt went with his Aunt Sissy to see him. The black hospital ward was noisy and dirty. When they left, to make their way home along Clay Street, the main thoroughfare of Vicksburg, passing through the white district, they saw a crowd of excited men. Sissy tried to pull him away, but Milt tugged at her hand and got closer. A black man was dangling by the neck on a cable from a tree limb. He was covered in blood, apparently already dead. The men, dancing drunkenly around the tree and swigging from whisky jugs, kept firing bullets into the body. Then they pushed a drum filled with gasoline under the body and set it afire. The flames leaped up and Milt saw the body sizzling and turning black like, he remembered, a piece of bacon, and a ghastly stench filled the air. Sissy dragged him home.

Next morning his mother said that a white woman had claimed to see a black man peeking in her window as she dressed. A pack of men set off in search, with dogs. The dogs barked at a man in the railway station. His was the body Milt saw cooking in the flames.

On his way to school the next morning, he passed the place of the killing. The tree was gone, the stump was covered with fresh red paint.

"That was the tradition," Milt said. "After a lynching, they'd cut down the tree and paint the stump red."

"The tradition?" I said. "The *tradition?*"

"Yeah," Milt said.

His Uncle Bob decided that one way or another he was going to get to Chicago, where all those good wages were supposedly paid.

"With this preacher telling people to go," Milt said, "the white people decided they can't let this cheap black labor get away. So they blocked the railway stations in Mississippi, and said, 'You can't buy a ticket.' A black man could not buy a ticket from Mississippi in 1910. You had to have permission from your boss. He had to give you a note or go down there with you."

"That's still slavery," I said, "except that you got a small salary."

"That's right. You couldn't *leave.* And the ones who had left already, who had escaped, are writing back telling how wonderful it was in Chicago, what great opportunities they offer you, and nobody bugs you, if you've got some money, you can get a nice place on the South Side. Black people from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, all moving to Chicago.

"My uncle Bob was working in a white barber shop in Vicksburg, Mississippi. And even white folks didn't have bathtubs in their houses in 1910 in Mississippi. So the barber shop was a very important place. Each white barber shop had tubs and places for your mug and razor and towels, so on Saturdays and Sundays people came down to get a bath and a razor for twenty-five cents. And no self-respecting barber would work on Sunday. But the shop had to be open, so the boss would tell the porter, 'You keep them tubs clean, you keep the water hot, keep them brushes clean, and charge them twenty-five cents a person. And when you come in on Monday, you tell me what you sold.' So if my uncle sold 40 baths, he told him he counted 30. And that's how he stashed his little stash."

But how was he to get out of town? Uncle Bob got a friend living in Memphis to send a letter saying that his

beloved Aunt Minnie was ill and wanted to see her nephew once more before she died. The barber wrote the requisite permission, Bob bought a round-trip ticket to Memphis (the only kind the station master would sell him), and in Memphis turned in the return half of the ticket for cash, which he spent on a ticket to Chicago. There he got a job as a bellboy, and began making very good money, as much as 50 dollars a day in tips. But tips were not the only source of money.

Milt said, "Chicago was a transit city and a convention center. Salesmen were there, the stock exchange, the stockyards. And all those hotels. Prostitution was rampant. At the hotels, the contact man was a porter. When a salesman arrived, and the porter took him to his room, the first thing he wanted was a girl. 'Get me a girl and I'll give you a good tip.'

"The girls were already in the hotel. They'd tell the porter, 'Get me a good john, I'll give you a good tip.' He was getting it from both sides. And he had this home-made gin down in the basement, and he'd take it upstairs and sell it for five dollars a pint."

Uncle Bob was sending home money, carefully wrapped in newspaper. But the money stopped with the advent of World War I. Bob got drafted, and in Vicksburg, Uncle Matt went into the navy. With the war over, Bob returned to Chicago and another good job and again sent money to Vicksburg. Matt joined him in Chicago, where they shared an apartment. They extricated two of their sisters, Milt's mother and his Aunt Pearl, from Vicksburg, leaving only Milt, his grandmother, and his Aunt Sissy there. When the brothers had set up the two sisters in an apartment, they sent money to bring the rest of the family to Chicago.

They were to catch a morning train, but it was raining heavily and they missed it. The three of them were standing in the railway station in the downpour, their baggage around them. One of the neighbors learned of their dilemma and sent a cart for them. They stayed at this friend's house through the day, drying their clothes, desperately hoping that nothing would prevent their leaving. It must have been a lot like trying to escape from Nazi Germany into Switzerland. They waited out the time, went to the station, and got on a six o'clock train. Milt remembers the black railway coach as filthy and smelling of rotting food. But Vicksburg receded behind them. They arrived in Chicago late the next day. It was autumn, and Chicago was cold. Milt's mother bought him a coat in the railway station, and they took a taxi to their new home.

Chicago was a revelation. Milt had always thought that being black meant being poor, and suddenly he was seeing black people who lived in homes far finer than anything in Vicksburg and wore the most elegant of clothes.

"There was a whole segment of town that was changing," Milt said. "The South Side of Chicago, where today black people still live in mass, was a beautiful section. The boulevard was called Grand Boulevard. Mansions were on this street, great mansions. Armour, Cudahy, Swift, had these great mansions there. And as black people began to move into town and working at the stockyards, and it was a little close, these rich white people began to move out, and they changed the name from Grand Boulevard to South Parkway. It's now Martin Luther King Drive.

"It was Grand Boulevard when I moved there in 1918."

Milt was enrolled at Doolittle Grammar School at 36th and Cottage Grove. He had been in Grade Five in Vicksburg, but the Doolittle authorities, after testing him, set him back three grades. He cried.

Milt's mother taught piano, his sister sang in her church choir, and his Uncle Matt — the two brothers lived nearby, and Milt loved to visit them for, among other benefits, the way their girlfriends gushed over him — played him Louis Armstrong records.

Chicago is largely a city of apartment buildings, and in much of it the buildings are three stories high and built of brick, with limestone windowsills and front-door frames. Their fronts, facing on the street, are pleasantly dignified. Their backs are a little shabby, facing onto the alleys that run like veins through the city. The backs of the buildings have flights of wooden stairs, connecting the balconies of each apartment. Some of these balconies are enclosed, some are open; and the steps are treacherous in winter, when they are slick with ice.

Milt said, "I delivered vegetables up and down those stairs for a Mr. Holt, who had a vegetable wagon. He rang a bell when he came into the back alley and people would come to the door, out on the porch, and say, 'Give me a dime's worth of sweet potatoes and ten cents worth of mustard greens.' He would give me five dollars worth of change and he would go somewhere and talk to some ladies while I delivered vegetables, running up and down those steps. He'd stay about an hour on that block and move on to the next block."

Milt remembered that every kid in the neighborhood seemed to be studying music, the girls taking piano lessons, the boys studying violin. When he was thirteen his mother bought him a violin. A neighborhood boy named Quinn Wilson taught him to tune it. They remained friends; Quinn Wilson was later an arranger for the Erskine Tate and Earl Hines bands.

Milt had a paper route, delivering the *Herald-Examiner*. One of the homes to which he took papers was that of the mother of violinist Eddie South.

He said, "I see these wonderful pictures on the wall. By this time Eddie was in Europe, playing. He was called the Dark Angel of the Violin. He was playing a lot of Hungarian

stuff. A black gypsy. He played for all the crowned heads of Europe, and for the Rothschild family, he was the darling of Europe. His mother said, 'Yes, that's my son. And you're studying music?' And I said, 'Yes, I'm studying music and playing it.' And she said, 'I hope some day you'll get to play with my son.'"

South, who had studied at Chicago Musical College, was a formidable musician. His career illustrates a dark irony in the history of American music: the fact that, perversely, the bigotry that excluded blacks from classical music effectually enriched and improved the music we have come to call jazz by driving such men as South into it.

The classic case is that of Will Marion Cook. Born in Washington DC, on January 27, 1869, Cook was trained as a violinist, educated at Oberlin College. He became a student of Antonin Dvorak during that period when Dvorak lived in New York (1892-95) and directed the National Conservatory. Dvorak, himself a part of the nationalist movement among European composers, whose essential tenet was that composers in each nation should use the folk and popular musical elements of their culture to the end of creating a formal art music, held that the United States would not develop a distinct American music until composers explored and incorporated into their work their folk elements, including Negro music. Impressed by Cook, Dvorak arranged for him to study in Europe with the great German violinist Joseph Joachim. During his time abroad, Cook came to know such European musical figures as Johannes Brahms.

Returning to America, Cook set out to establish a concert career. After a Boston music critic described him in what (one may presume) he thought to be flattering terms as the best Negro violinist in America, Cook entered the man's office, asked if he had written the review, and on being told Yes, said, "I am the best *violinist* in the country," and smashed his fiddle on the man's desk. He never played again. Researchers have verified the story.

Cook turned his attention to writing for the musical theater. Collaborating with poet Lawrence Dunbar, he produced in 1898 the revue *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk*, the first important black musical on Broadway. In 1918 he formed what was at first called the New York Syncopated Orchestra but later, perhaps in deference to general public stereotyping, the Southern Syncopated Orchestra. One of its members was Sidney Bechet. Cook took the orchestra to England, where it performed for King George V. (This inspired Sidney Bechet's delicious remark that this was the first time he'd ever met anybody whose picture was on money.) The foray into Europe inspired the essay *Sur un Orchestre Nègre* by the Swiss mathematician and conductor Ernest Ansermet. Though elements of the essay have occasionally been mistranslated, it does make a prediction that this is the way music is likely to go.

In New York, Cook befriended Duke Ellington, passed along Dvorak's exhortations for a distinct American music, and (by Ellington's testimony) taught the latter elements of harmony and composition. Thus one must consider the influence of Dvorak on what came to be called jazz, and wonder in what ways jazz and American music generally might be different were it not for the faint fragrance of condescension in the writing of a Boston music critic.

The degree to which jazz drew sustenance from this exclusion from "classical" music must be considered in any reflections on the careers of Eddie South, Teddy Wilson, James P. Johnson, Hank Jones, and others, certainly including an aspiring violinist named Milt Hinton.

Milt took Saturday morning lessons at Hull House, the famous community center established by Jane Addams. One of his friends there was a young clarinet student named Benny Goodman, with whom he discussed music.

The vegetable delivery days were over. Milt had a new job.

"It was 1925 or '26," Milt said. "We looked on Al Capone as more or less a Robin Hood in the black community. There was a lot of shifting of power. It didn't concern us in the black community on the South Side until the thing got pretty big and people realized there was a potential of a lot of money.

"Al Capone had decided to come to the South Side of Chicago and sell alcohol to the people who gave house-rent parties."

Rent parties were a part of the legend and lore of musical evolution in Chicago. And they exemplified the sense of community in the black population of Chicago which, I have been told, did not exist in that of New York. Chicago was *different*. When someone had trouble coming up with the rent money, they'd hire a pianist, throw a big party, and charge admission. Thus they would come up with the needed money.

"My uncle," Milt said, "knew Pete Ford, who had a cleaning and pressing place, which was centralized at 37th and State Street, and he got me a job there. Al Capone told Pete, 'I'll bring my alcohol over here and I'll sell it to you for 12 dollars a gallon. You sell it to all these houses that have these parties.' We called them skiffle parties. He said, 'You sell it for 18 dollars a gallon. You make six dollars on the gallon. Just don't buy from nobody but me. I pay all the police protection. I give you the cars to deliver it in, and I pay you good money.'

"He brought us cases of liquor with that green strip across the top of it, which meant it was bonded. We'd take that green strip off the top and pour the whisky in a tub and put alcohol in there and make *three* cases of bonded whisky. We'd put it back in the bottles. And he had some black guy,

a guy that had a funny eye, that worked for the government who'd get these sheets as big as the *New York Times* of government bonds. And I used to sit back of the cleaning and pressing place and clip these things in strips, and put them over the bottle and you thought you had a five-dollar bottle of bonded whiskey.

"We would sell that to the house-rent parties. We had three trucks. One was El Passo Cigars. One was Ford Cleaning and Pressing. I can't remember the name of the third truck. We delivered to the people giving house-rent parties all the way from 31st Street out to 63rd Street, from State Street to the lake. It was a thriving business. Pete Ford made a fortune. The only thing you needed to do was sit there and take the telephone calls, and deliver.

"And Al Capone came every Thursday or Friday, I can't remember what day it was, in a big car, bullet proof. He'd come with his bodyguards with a bag full of money. And he would park that car and walk in the back of that Ford Cleaning and Pressing place, and the police would be lined up, like they were waiting for a bus. He paid every one of them five dollars, and every sergeant ten. He paid 'em off, so we had no problem with the police at all. You'd never have your house raided.

"Everything was great. There were gang wars, and big funerals with lots of flowers. But then things calmed down because Capone took over the whole city. He had the hotels.

"And all of these flats in Chicago, where people are having these house-rent parties, they were buying alcohol from Pete Ford. Every weekend a different person would have a house-rent party. They'd have a lot of fried chicken. Everybody had a piano. That's why we had what we called ragtime. Ragtime was not band music, it was piano music. They'd get a good piano player to come in and play skiffle, which is what we called boogie-woogie in those days. A guy named Dan Burley was a very important man in jazz history, a good piano player. He was a newspaperman. In fact he went to school with me. We were on the Wendell Phillips High School newspaper, the Phillipsite. He taught me how to run a linotype machine. My mother had run a press in Mississippi for a Baptist minister. So I knew how to set type.

"Dan Burley played house-rent piano. He wasn't a good reader or an academic musician. He was a good contact man. He knew where the best house-rent parties were gonna be, and he was there playing for them.

"These piano players made lots of money. They'd get two dollars or five dollars to come in, and you'd get your fried chicken and your drinks and there'd be a lot of girls there.

"It was party time. The guys were making good money. Labor was making 25, 35 dollars a week in the stockyards. A loaf of bread was ten cents.

" I was 15 years old. Every day after school I would come by Ford Cleaning and Pressing. That was the shill. They weren't cleaning any clothes in there. I was getting something like 50 dollars a week. For a kid, it was crazy!

"This one Saturday afternoon, we were delivering all this alcohol to these different apartments. One-gallon tins, with a screw top on it. We loaded up the truck. Pete Ford had on a candy-stripe silk shirt. It was hot in the summertime. He had about fifteen hundred dollars in his shirt pocket. He always carried a lot of money. He was a big guy, nice-looking guy, ate like a horse.

"I was driving the truck. As we were crossing Oakwood Boulevard a lady in a Nash car hit us direct sideways, going full. I went right out the driver's side, out the window. Pete was lying in the street. Alcohol was all over. I thought he was dead. I tried to get up. My arm was broken, my leg was broken, my hand was broken. The finger next to my pinky on my right hand was *off*, hanging by skin. I pulled myself up. My face was cut. I crawled over and grabbed the money out of Pete Ford's pocket.

"The police were all around, but it was Capone's stuff. No problem. They took Pete to one hospital and me to another. I was in terrible shape. By the time they got me to the hospital my legs and hands were starting to swell. I was in excruciating pain. And my finger's hanging. I'm screaming. The doctor said, 'I've gotta take this finger off.' And I was studying *violin*. I said, 'Please don't take my finger off!'

"Now Capone heard about this accident, where two of his men got hurt. Whenever anything happened, he showed up or sent one of his lieutenants. And I'm screaming, 'Please don't take my finger off.'"

In his book *Bass Line* Milt said that Capone's lieutenant Eddie Pappan came to the hospital. But he told me that Capone himself came. "My mother came. She was crying. Capone says to the doctor, 'If he says don't take it off, then don't take it off.'"

When Laurence Bergreen was researching his biography of Capone, I suggested that he talk to Milt Hinton and gave him Milt's phone number. The book, a massive (and superb) study titled *Capone: The Man and the Era* (Simon and Schuster 1994) contains this quote from Milt:

"Al Capone got my mother and brought her down to the hospital. He said to the doctor, 'Don't cut that finger off, don't cut it off.' And what Al Capone said, went."

Possibly both Capone and Pappan were there. One of them certainly issued an order to the doctor.

"And here it is today," Milt said, showing me the finger. "But they put it together wrong. The bone was smashed. But I've never had a moment's trouble with that finger.

"Pete Ford died. I've never driven again to this day."

To be continued