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Jazzletter

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We Are Like Atlas

Part Two

At the end of his grade school days, Milt became a student at Wendell Phillips High School. Wendell Phillips — named after the famous Boston abolitionist — had an exceptional music department, headed Dr. Mildred Bryant Jones. She was conductor of the school's symphony orchestra. During his time there, Milt was soloist in the Mendelssohn violin concerto. The school also had a brass band, headed by Major N. Clarke Smith.

Milt said, "One of the most popular and famous black newspapers was the *Chicago Defender*. They had an editor named Abbott. He was very much interested in youth. A picnic for young people was organized every year by the *Chicago Defender*.

"When the black people moved into Chicago en masse to those big mansions, as I said, the white people moved out. The first people black people to make big money were women who made hair straighteners, because black women were using this stuff to process their hair.These women who produced this stuff got rich. This was before even black men began to use it.

"Madame Walker, out of Indianapolis, Indiana, made a fortune making this stuff. There was another lady named Addie Malone, out of St. Louis. They still have an Addie Malone Day in St. Louis.

"This lady had a product called Poro. My wife Mona was one of her secretaries as a young girl. This woman was a very Christian woman and a very enterprising lady. She opened up a school for black girls in St. Louis to teach cosmetology and hairdressing.

"Now these women, with the money they amassed, began to buy these mansions on Grand Boulevard. Addie Malone bought two. She bought one for a school for her girls. And when Mr. Abbott wanted to organize a youth band for black kids so they could learn to play and go around the country and perform, Mrs. Malone loaned the *Chicago Defender* the other mansion for the rehearsals for these black youths.

"Major N. Clarke Smith was in charge. That's where Lionel Hampton, and yours truly, and Hayes Alvis, and Nat Cole, and Scoops Carry, went for band rehearsals. Because we were in his high-school band at Wendell Phillips. Every Saturday he would have rehearsals. Lionel was a year or two older than I. He got in the band on drums. He wanted to keep me out because I was in short pants! But I could always read good. I wanted to get in the band because I wanted the chance to learn the bass horn. And when Nat Cole wanted to get into the band, because he wanted to play the lyre, and Nat was younger than I, I tried to keep *him* out!

"My mother loved Nat Cole. He would play piano for her church socials. Even after he was dead, she called him 'dear Nathaniel.'

"Major N. Clarke Smith was a very great disciplinarian. A very military person. He wore a uniform all the time. And for reasons not known to me, he had a deep connection with Lyon and Healey, who had a big music store in Chicago. He was commissioned by Lyon and Healey to go around the world and write music about black people and to come back to Chicago and perform it. He did. I still have some of the music. He had us play it. *Pineapple Lament*. He went down into the Carribean. He was not a jazzman! He was interested in the more academic world, like Sousa or something. And this is the kind of band we grew up in.

"I remember at Wendell Phillips High we had no idea what great influence he had. I remember one day he said to us in class, 'I don't think any of you kids ever heard a symphony orchestra.

"He said, 'I think I'll call up Fred Stock. . . .'

"We sort of giggled. He's going to call up Frederick Stock, the conductor of the Chicago Symphony!

"He said, 'I think I'll call up Fred Stock and have him bring the orchestra out here.'

"And we giggled some more. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's going to come out to our school at 39th and Prairie Avenue! And in a week or two, they did, and played for us. I remember they played Haydn. *The Surprise Symphony*.

"I was coming along pretty good. I'm playing violin, I'm president of the symphony orchestra at school, and I'm director of the jazz orchestra. First Major N. Clarke Smith put me on peckhorn. I always had a fascination for big things. So he gave me a bass saxophone. I liked that. There were only two bass horns in school, and there we had two players, and I had to wait for one of them to graduate. Finally

one of the guys graduated, Quinn Wilson, and I got a chance at the bass horn. Nat Cole's older brother Eddie played tuba, and then he graduated.

"Major Smith said to me one day, 'Go down to Lyon and Healey's and tell them I said to give you a sarrusaphone.' It's built like a double bassoon, but it's brass. It's five foot tall. And you can't break it down like a bassoon. And it had a big wide double reed on it. I went down to Lyon and Healey, and they *gave* me one. I had to bring this thing back on the bus in this *huge* long case. My mother said, 'What in God's name are you going to do with that thing?' It has a very deep bass sound. It buzzes like a bassoon, and it's fingered like a saxophone. Adolph Sax made it.

"Major Smith was a marvelous conductor. He left Wendell Phillips to teach at Sumner High School, a black high school in St. Louis. And Captain Walter Dyett replaced him.

"I was supposed to graduate in 1930 but I graduated in the 1929 class. And they hadn't even finished building Dusable High. Captain Dyett came to Wendell Phillips and he went on to Dusable. He's the one who had Johnny Griffin and Richard Davis and Johnny Hartman. It was really a continuation, the next generation after us. I left Nat Cole in school, I left Ray Nance in school. John Levy was also at Wendell Phillips. I gave him my Sam Browne belt when I graduated. I was a lieutenant in the band by the time I graduated.

"Ed Fox had the Grand Terrace Cafe, and he had Percy Venable, a choreographer from Pittsburgh. Al Capone decided to open up a Cotton Club in Cicero, copied after the one in New York City. Black dancers, black musicians, white audiences. He gave a lot of work to guys. This was about the time I was ready to play. I was doing very well on violin. Every theater in every neighborhood had a violin player, a piano player, and a drummer to play for the screen.

"And that was when Al Jolson was in the first sound movie. When they showed that they didn't need orchestras in the theater, violinists lost their jobs, and here I am, just about ready to enter that business. Things got a little thin. And when Al Capone opened that Cotton Club in Cicero, and used all these black musicians, it was like manna from heaven. All the kids that I went to school with began to get jobs. One of my friends tried to get me to change from violin to trombone, because there weren't any violins in the band. They were using trumpets and saxophones. But I never learned how to play trombone. I was still delivering newspapers. The guys would come by and see me delivering newspapers for nine dollars a week and they were making 75 dollars a week in Al Capone's Cotton Club. And they'd say, 'Sporty,' which was my nickname, 'get a horn.' And I was totally embarrassed. Which is why I switched to bass.

"Capone didn't frequent the South Side, except to pay off. But he was in that Cotton Club in Cicero a lot. The guy who produced the show was Lucky Millinder. That's how he got started. His uncle, Percy Venable, was the choreographer for the Grand Terrace. He came from Pittsburgh. And his nephew was Lucky Venable. That was Lucky Millinder's name. When Capone opened his Cotton Club, he wanted to get Percy Venable to produce his shows. And Ed Fox, who owned the Grand Terrace, wouldn't let him go. Percy said, 'Take my nephew.' So Capone took Lucky Venable who changed his name to Lucky Millinder. And that's how he got his start as a bandleader. He was never a musician. But he knew choreography. I was in the band there for a while. There were no arrangements. He'd get the girls together and say, 'Two choruses and a half, take the last eight, tag four,' and that's the way we went out."

"Dizzy said he was a good bandleader."

"He was. He was not a musician. He exploited the same sort of thing that Cab Calloway had. Have a good flashy guy in front of the band. And Lucky was flashy. The gangsters put Cab in front of the Missourians. Missourians was a corporate band, owned by the musicians. It was a great band. They were all from Missouri. When they got ready to come east to New York, they needed somebody in front of 'em. Cab's sister Blanche Calloway was working in a club in Chicago owned by Joe Glaser's mother."

Joe Glaser was later known as Louis Armstrong's manager and president of the Associated Booking Corporation, which booked, among other bands, that of Duke Ellington. There were always rumors in the jazz world of Glaser's shady connections, but for that matter anyone in the nightclub world of Chicago in the 1920s had connections of some sort with Al Capone: he actually ran the city. In his biography of Capone, Larry Bergreen wrote:

"In an earlier incarnation Glaser was an influential fight promoter in Chicago. From his two-room office in the Loop, Glaser ran his boxing empire and zealously protected his turf. When a gambler and part-time journalist named Eddie Borden denounced Glaser in print as a front for the Capone organization, Glaser had him run out of town and swiftly returned to business as usual. Glaser's power to fix fights earned him a reputation as the sage of boxing . . . ."

In those days, Milt said, Cab Calloway " was a young kid, a basketball player, who'd come around to see his sister Blanche. She wanted to get him into the club, so she taught him how to sing, and he'd come in and play the drums."

Blanche Calloway was five years Cab's senior. She began singing in Baltimore clubs — she and her brother were both born in Maryland — in the 1920s, recorded with Louis Armstrong in 1925, worked with Andy Kirk, and for a time had her own band. Thus she was Cab's entree to show business. The mob people were impressed by the dashing young man.

"So the gangsters," Milt continued, "said to the Missourians, 'Put this kid in front of the band.' And they were a great

success. They played the Savoy Ballroom and were doing great. When Duke Ellington was getting ready to leave the Cotton Club in New York, they said, 'Give him the band.' They told the Missourians, 'It's Cab's band now.' The bass player was the leader, so he was naturally fired. They told the guys in the band, 'You can stay, but Cab Calloway is the bandleader, and you're going into the Cotton Club.' And they stayed. I can tell you who they were. Lamarr Wright, Walter Thomas, Andy Brown, Doc Cheatham. They stayed and it was a tremendous success.

"Cab was made by radio broadcasts from the Cotton Club two or three times a week. Network radio was starting and people all over the country could hear you.

"When they got Capone on income tax, he said, 'If you think all of these people that I'm hiring, who are making three or four hundred dollars a week when everybody else that works a week long in the stockyards and different places is making 25 and 30 dollars, are going to go back to taking jobs at 15 or 20 dollars a week, you're crazy.'

"And that's when chaos broke loose. They broke up all that alcohol-selling, and those people were not going to go back to those jobs. And they started robbing and killing and breaking into places. It changed the whole complexion of the town. The happiness all left, the clubs all closed, and it was pretty drab there for a long time after that."

"The first band I ever played in, really," Milt said, "was not a jazz band. It was a sweet band at the Jeffrey Tavern, a white tavern. It was like Lester Lanin. The bass player got sick or something, and somebody recommended me for just one night. I got 19 dollars. That's the first time I made any money playing bass. I was still delivering newspapers, 200 papers every morning, *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, for $9.75 a week, and going to Northwestern University. That's how I gradually got into the gigs, when I got this one job for $19, and I worked late, and I had to deliver my morning papers. Then somebody else got sick in a band, and I got a call again. My mother said, 'You can't do both things. You've got to make a decision.' I had no dreams it would be possible to make a living in music. That was the toughest decision of my life, to give up my paper route.

"I had to wait for some of the older players to get drunk or get sick. We didn't have too many clubs to go to. There was a guy named Charlie Levy. He wrote arrangements and played violin in old road houses. He had a car. This is summertime. He'd put me in a car and we'd go out to some tavern. There was no juke boxes in those days. We'd go in and start playing, and they'd give us nickels and dimes and quarters, and we'd come home with $10 a piece.

"I came out of Northwestern University, because I was sleeping in the history classes, and Dr. Jones, who had studied with Coleridge Taylor, asked me what was I doing. Why was I so tired? I explained I was working and I had to help support my mother. He encouraged me not to kill myself just to get a degree, but to continue my studies in music, because I seemed to be talented along those lines.

"Consequently I started working with bands around Chicago. I got to work with Erksine Tate. The Savoy Ballroom got to be very popular. All those bands came through Chicago from the west and from the east. Andy Kirk and Duke Ellington. They all played the Savoy Ballroom. And we had a union there, so they had to have a relief band. So I got the job in the relief band, playing the intermission. I got the chance to hear and see Mary Lou Williams and her husband, John Williams, who was a saxophone player. Ben Webster was in the band at that time. Duke Ellington came through and I got the chance to stand there and watch Wellman Braud, and hope he'd just drop his rosin, so I could hand it to him or something like that. The contribution to me was to be around those wonderful people, and see it.

"In 1929, Eddie South came back from Europe. He had a manager named Sam Skolnick. He was an agent. Eddie had been so successful in Europe, Skolnick had convinced some people they should put him into some of the great white hotels downtown in Chicago, with violins, a society type of band. This guy organized the band while Eddie was still in Europe. He got some great musicians. They got me to play bass in this band. It rehearsed for maybe four or five in the afternoon upstairs in a Chinese restaurant called Chu Chin Chow near the Savoy Ballroom. We rehearsed music like *Dancing on the Ceiling* and that kind of beautiful stuff. Eddie was supposed to come in with his quartet from Europe and be augmented by this band. We had the rehearsal, and the powers that be decided they couldn't have a black band in this hotel downtown.

"The agent had signed everybody up to contracts, $75 a week, guaranteeing us 30 weeks a year. And then the bubble burst. And Eddie had to buy the contracts back from the musicians. He paid $300 a piece. It probably depleted what he had earned in Europe. They paid everybody off. And when they got to me, this guy said to Eddie, 'Now wait, we can get you a job in one of the small clubs. You don't have a bass player. So don't give this kid $300. Give him a job.'

"That's how I got the job with Eddie South. We worked for Al Capone. He owned the Club Rubaiyat, a small club on the North Side that seated less than a hundred. That's where I began to meet most of the white musicians, because everybody knew about Eddie South. We had a small band, with a piano player named Anthony Joe Spalding, from Louisville, Kentucky. A very great piano player. He played all kinds of music, things like *Rhapsody in Blue*, all of the French music. This guy played it well. Eddie had Stanley Wilson on guitar, and a drummer named Lester Moreira, from Cuba, who later played for Cugat. And he hired me for

bass. And we played these wonderful things. I learned to play all the classical things that Eddie played. And all of the musicians from Ben Pollack's band used to come over to hear Eddie South. Benny Goodman was in that band, and Jack Teagarden. This is where we got to meet all these wonderful musicians and exchange ideas. And later they'd go out and jam together. It was that kind of a thing.

"We stayed in this little club until 1933. That was the year they had the Democratic National Convention in Chicago at the Congress Hotel. The Congress was a fabulous hotel. And they decided then, we couldn't play in the big ballroom, but they put us in the lobby, by the fountain. We were playing music with the water dripping, and that's where I got to see all those congressmen. I saw Al Smith and John Nance Garner, speaker of the house, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. That was the convention that nominated Roosevelt for president.

"We got to do a recording session for RCA. One of the big tunes was *Old Man Harlem* at that time. Then we went to California. We went to a beautiful club on Hollywood Boulevard, the Club Ballyhoo. We had a trio, Eddie South, Everett Barksdale on guitar, and I'm playing bass. We were really tight. All strings. We played from hot jazz to classical music. Everett Barksdale was the first black guitarist I ever worked with that really read music and played single-string stuff. He was out of Detroit. He was absolutely fantastic. There was no amplification, of course. All they had for entertainment besides Eddie South was a dance trio, a woman and two men. We had to play tango for them. The woman was Carmen Miranda and one of the men was Cesar Romero.

"Now all of the great writers and the good musicians in the studios had heard of Eddie South. That was 1933. We stayed in California. Eddie's career grew. We came to Chicago after that

"Joe Venuti had always loved Eddie South. He was a great benefactor of Eddie's. You hear all the crazy stories about all the jokes that Joe Venuti did. And of course he did that. He was a raucous guy. I never saw one instance of his having any racial feelings at all. He told me that he and Eddie Lang used to cork their faces and go up to Harlem to jam with black musicians, so that nobody would give them any flak about it. When he was with Paul Whiteman at the College Inn, Eddie South was at the Vendome Theater, Whiteman had a great singer with him named Bea Palmer.

"She was used to being accompanied by Joe Venuti on violin. He played beautifully behind her. Joe was leaving with a group of his own playing country clubs. And this lady was distraught because she didn't have Joe to play jazz behind her. She said, 'What am I going to do?' And Joe Venuti said, 'Get Eddie South.' But of course, you couldn't get a black violin player to play in Whiteman's band *then*. They put her on the stage and put a screen behind her and Eddie South stood behind it and played for her.

"Joe Venuti was so wonderful. When he went on tour with his trio, people asked him, 'Who can we get to follow you in here?' Joe always recommended Eddie South. We began to get these wonderful jobs, playing in these exclusive country clubs. When we got there, there was always a very funny note left on the piano for us from Joe Venuti. He made it possible for Eddie to make a very good living.

"Years later I got the chance to work with Joe Venuti. After working with Eddie South, I loved violin, and it was my first instrument. About a third of my record collection is violin players, from Heifetz on down. So I finally got a chance to work with Joe in New York City. He appreciated me because I understood the violin. We could play contrapuntal things. And I could bow. I had one of the most exciting times of my life with him. I was playing with him at Michael's Pub when he got very sick and died — his last engagement

"I've always been a sideman. I've never had a band. I've worked once or twice in a little trio. I always decided I wanted to be such a good bass player that people would want me to work for them. I could always work. That's what happened to me with Eddie South. Work slowed down for violin players, but I could get gigs around Chicago. I'm not expensive, I'm a side man. I'm getting scale, but I can survive on scale. A violinist of Eddie's stature can't work for scale."

"And," I interjected, "a jazz violinist can't work as a sideman."

"No, that's right," Milt said. "And if you've got any kind of reputation, you can't step into somebody else's band. I'm working around with Erskine Tate and Johnny Long and Joe Williams, we're working on the South Side. Eddie South had to sit at home. And he's my *master*. And I'm ending up with a hundred dollars at the end of the week. I had to loan him twenty, because he didn't have the money. He always paid me back when he got a gig. But it was very sad. That's how I really got established, working with Eddie South. In 1934, we got on the RKO circuit with a comedian, and Lee Sims, the pianist, and Olive May Bailey, all through theaters in Ohio, and wound up at the Palace Theater in New York City for one week. I made 75 bucks.

"I didn't want to go back home. That's just like I'd get back in school or something. So I stayed around New York. For five dollars a week, I got a room in the 135th Street YMCA. I starved, but I didn't care. I could get a fish sandwich with four slices of bread and a whole fish laid across it for 20 cents up in Harlem. I'd cut that sucker in half, put a little hot sauce on it, wrap the other half up and put it in my pocket for later. You could get a big soda for three cents. And I'm trying to get a gig. I go by the Apollo Theater and

listen to the rehearsal. I had no dreams: John Kirby was a jazz bass player, Beverly Peer was with Chick Webb. I had no way to survive. I finally had to go back to Chicago.

"In the early 1930s, there was only one big band, besides Les Kincaid's, in Chicago, and that was Earl Hines' band. So there weren't a lot of jobs for bass players. I couldn't get into Earl Hines' band, because he had Quinn Wilson, who graduated ahead of me, and he had Hayes Alvis, a great bass player that used to be a drummer. When the Grand Terrace closed for the summer, the band split up. Some guys would take one half of the band, and some guys would take the other and go to small clubs. I worked my way up to be the second bass player.

"The first time there was ever a coast-to-coast network was when the Lindbergh baby was kidnaped. That night Earl Hines was on the air from midnight at the Grand Terrace. They kept him on the air all night, and they would patch in from Oak Park, Illinois, to Gary, Indiana, to Indianapolis, to relay that message about that baby's kidnaping. It was the first band to ever play coast-to-coast network, a network of stations thirty or forty miles apart.

"Then, in 1935, Zutty Singleton from New Orleans really established me. He was even more respected than Louis Armstrong. He worked with Louis in the Hot Five. And now he's got the job at the Three Deuces down at State and Lake. And he hired me as his bass player. Cozy Cole's brother, Lee Cole, was on piano, Lee Collins was playing trumpet, Everett Barksdale was playing guitar, and Zutty Singleton was playing drums. These guys were New Orleans seniors, and they hired me. There were not too many string bass players around. Zutty was a giant, and when he hired me, that was my stamp of approval into the New Orleans society. Art Tatum was the relief piano player.

"And it was my sad duty, at the end of the night, closing up his set, I had to go play with him. I never caught him yet. He was playing those fantastic changes that I never knew, and I stood there in amazement, trying to catch him all the time. But he was always so nice. We played pinochle together, so the rout wasn't that complete. He'd hold the cards right up to his eye, with the light behind him. A unique man. He would make the waiters set up the room the way it was going to be that night. He knew how to maneuver through the tables without falling or stumbling to the piano.

"I played there with Zutty in 1935. That's when Cab was going out to California to do *The Singing Kid* with Al Jolson. Cab had Al Morgan, this fabulous bass player from New Orleans. Photogenic. Big, tall, looked he was chiseled out of ebony. Handsome man, exotic clothes, and the ladies loved him. A great shower, and of course he was the biggest showman of the time, and they're making this movie with Al Jolson. And in one of the scenes, Cab Calloway is dancing and shaking his hair, and he looked up. He thought the camera was on him and it was on the bass player, Al Morgan. And of course that didn't sit too good.

"Then Al Morgan beat Cab out of a couple of ladies, and so they weren't too tight together. And then one of the directors told Al Morgan, 'If you're out here in California and we've got a jazz movie, the way you went over, you've got the job.' And so with this altercation between the two of them, Al Morgan *quit* and stayed out in California and joined Les Hite's band. Lionel Hampton was in that band, Lawrence Brown, quite a few guys.

"Cab had to come back east without a bass player for his one-nighters. Well my friend Keg Johnson, Budd Johnson's brother, who had gotten in Cab Calloway's band, said, 'Well going through Chicago, check out Milt Hinton. He's down at the Three Deuces with Zutty.' Cab Calloway stopped in at the Three Deuces in his coon-skin coat on a cold winter night, and he came in the door and everybody saw it was Cab Calloway, and they were making over him. And he never said a word to me. He came up to Zutty Singleton and said, 'I hear that kid's pretty good. How is he?' Zutty said, 'He's fine. He's a good kid. He plays good.'

"And Cab said, 'Well, can I have him?'

"And Zutty said, 'Yeah.' He didn't ask me *anything*. He just gave me away, like a baseball player. Zutty came upstairs, and I was playing cards with Art Tatum, and Zutty said, 'Well kid, you're gone.'

"I said, 'I'm gone *where*?'

"'Well Cab just asked me for you,' he said with that New Orleans talk.

"I said, 'Zutty, do I have to give you notice or anything?'

"He said, 'Get your ass out of here tonight.'

"We went back and played another set and Cab Hi-de-hoed a couple of choruses with us, and all he said to me, he turned around to me and said, 'The train leaves from the South Street Station at 9 o'clock in the morning. Be there.' And he walked out.

"I had to call home and tell my Mama — and that was one o'clock in the morning, and we played till four — I've got this job with Cab Calloway, and tell her to pack up whatever I have. I only had one suit. She packed up a canvass bag with a change of underwear and a clean shirt. I got on this train in South Street Station, and I'd never been in a Pullman in life. And you know I didn't come from Mississippi in a Pullman. I got in this train, and all these giants were there. There was Doc Cheatham, Mouse Randolph, Claude Jones — Tommy Dorsey's buddy, great trombone player — Keg Johnson, my friend. And Cab Calloway and Ben Webster had been out in the night in town and got drunk, and *missed* the train.

"But if you missed the train downtown, you could get on at the 63rd Street station. Keg Johnson is introducing me to the guys. I musta looked terrible. The train stopped at the 63rd Street station, and Cab Calloway and Ben Webster fall in

drunk.

"Ben Webster looked at me, and said, 'What is *that?*'

"And Cab said, 'That's the new bass player.'

"And Ben Webster said, 'That is *what?*' I must have weighed a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet. I swore I would never like this man. And he turned out to be one of my dearest friends."

I found myself laughing out loud, having often stood beside Ben, in all his gloomy majesty, talking at the bar of Jim and Andy's in New York. I said, "I think everybody had experiences with Ben. When he was drunk, get out of the way."

"That's *right*,' Milt said. "But he was beautiful. He was good to me.

"I was in the band three months on the road, playing one nighters, before we hit New York. Cab said, 'We've got a lot of one-nighters. I'll keep you till I get to New York and get me a good bass player.'

"And I stayed with his band 16 years.

"When we got on the road, the guys liked me. Al Morgan hadn't been much of a good reader, because he was from New Orleans. But he was a handsome bass player, and he knew the book. There *was* no book when I got there!

"But I knew changes, and all of that stuff. Benny Payne, the pianist, was calling changes off to me. And I was doing so well. But the funny part, I've got to tell you . . . . Cab turns to the guys — the guys all seemed to be satisfied with me — and said, 'Let's give 'im a blood test.' He called this hard number that Al Morgan was featured in. It was called *Reefer Man*. I had no music. I said to Benny Payne, 'What's that?' He said, 'It features the bass. You start out playing anything you wanna play, and the band'll come in. And it's blues changes when the band comes in.'

"So I started this in F, man, and I played a chromatic deal. I played the F scale upside down and sideways. I squared F, I cubed F. I did every conceivable thing. And when finally the band came in with this big chord, I wanted to drop my bass and go out. Benny Payne says, 'Keep on playing.' Now the band's playing the blues, about ten choruses. And all of a sudden the band stops, and Benny says, 'You got it.'

"That's when I started slapping the bass, and playing all kinds of hip scales and everything. I used to wear my hair in a pompadour, long in front and you plastered it down to your head with grease to make it smooth, and I got hot and the perspiraton was running offa me. And the grease ran off and my hair stood straight up!" he said, laughing. "And the musicians in the band were rolling! They were laughing, they could hardly play their horns, and Cab was out of his skull. He was falling out. And they let me go for about ten minutes by myself and I said to Benny Payne, 'What the hell do I do now?' And Benny said, 'When you get thinking about time, just fall back like you're fainting and I'll catch you.'And that's the way it ended. And the audience cracked up.

"Ben Webster was very kind to me now. He'd take me around with him. We'd get to a town and he'd want to go jamming. He taught me how to approach things, how to lead into a chorus, and all that sort of stuff. I'm making a hundred dollars a week now, after the $35 I was making with Zutty, and by the time we get to New York, I've saved up about four, five hundred dollars. That was good bread! That was the Depression. You could get a good meal for 35 cents. A suit cost twenty-two-fifty.

"And I looked so bad, Ben don't want me to come into New York and hangin' with him, and he's was always dressed impeccably. So Ben and Keg Johnson take me right down to Billy Taub's, one of the clothing stores. He put things up in front of me. And they're dressing me like your Mom would. 'How does this look on him?' And they picked up a nice green suit, and I put this suit on, and they bought me shirts with my money. So by the time I got to Harlem, I was pretty cool, I was sharp.

"Now this is 1936. I'm in the band, I'm established, everybody loves me, and *I'm playing my ass off*. Everything's going right. The Cotton Club is opening downtown where the Latin Quarter was, used to be Palais Royal where Paul Whiteman used to play. Now they made it the Cotton Club, Owney Madden is closing the one in Harlem and moving it to 48th and Broadway. The first show is Cab Calloway and Bill Robinson, the Berry Brothers, Fred Coots, and a host of others, including Will Vodery. Nobody mentions Will Vodery any more. It's just terrible."

Vodery was an arranger and orchestrator for Florenz Ziegfeld. He worked for Jerome Kern, orchestrated *Show Boat*, and he was the first black composer and arranger to penetrate the film industry. Milt was astonished that I'd heard of him.

"He orchestrated the very first Cotton Club show downtown. And he was so damn sure of himself, he scored in ink. I had never seen a man like Vodery. A dignified man. A brown-skinned man. He had trouble with hearing in one of his ears. He lived up in Harlem, but he had a place in Saratoga too. He rehearsed us. J. Fred Coots was writing tunes."

Among Coots' tunes were *For All We Know, Love Letters in the Sand*, and *You Go to My Head*.

"Harold Arlen did some of the tunes later," Milt said. "Vodery rehearsed us. Nobody's heard of some of these people."

To be continued

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