2. Cleveland’s Earliest Links to Jazz

To much of the world, music in Cleveland means the Cleveland Orchestra, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, polka bands, and Muzak (which, incidently, was invented in Cleveland in 1922 by Maj. Gen. George Squier). Forgotten by many is the fact that Cleveland has also made significant contributions to jazz.

While Cleveland’s contributions to jazz certainly do not rival those of New Orleans, Chicago, Kansas City or New York, this city has had many important links to jazz history – links that were largely ignored for decades.

This book looks at the history of jazz from the viewpoint of Cleveland. While that may seem to be a somewhat distorted view considering the contributions of other cities, I believe, when you look at Cleveland’s many contributions to jazz history, it is a valid and important view.

The most obvious Cleveland links are the large number of Cleveland artists who became leaders in the growth of jazz. They have included such outstanding musicians as saxophonist Joe Lovano; pianist, arranger and composer Tadd Dameron; trumpeters Freddie Webster, Emmett Berry and Benny Bailey; free jazz pioneer Albert Ayler; guitarists Bill de Arango and Jim Hall; drummers Fats Heard and Morey Feld; trombonists Jiggs Whigham and John Fedchock; clarinetist Ken Peplowski; and even jazz whistler Ron McCroby.

In addition, Cleveland and Northeast Ohio have been the scenes of many significant events in the careers of some of the most important figures in jazz. Duke Ellington’s principal teacher studied here. Artie Shaw spent his formative years here. Bix Beiderbecke suffered a tragic set-back here. Jimmie Lunceford began his professional career here. Art Tatum spent years playing at an after-hours club here. Count Basie married a girl from Cleveland and their only child was born here. Django Reinhardt played his first American concert here. Dave Brubeck pioneered college jazz concerts here.

While Cleveland’s contributions to jazz can be traced to the earliest years, they were strongest during the swing and bebop periods. And, after a resurgence of jazz in Cleveland in the last two decades of the 20th century, a new generation of artists, educators and writers has been making significant new contributions.

In the earliest years of jazz, Northeast Ohio produced two musicians who made extremely important contributions. Neither was considered a jazz musician, but both were historically very important to the development of the art form. In addition, Cleveland was an early center in the manufacturing of musical instruments.

Will Marion Cook

Can you imagine jazz with no saxophones? There would be no Lester Young, no Charlie Parker, no Coleman Hawkins, no Johnny Hodges, no John Coltrane.

The saxophone was invented in 1840 by Adolphe Sax, a Belgian instrument-maker. He was hoping to develop a new instrument that would combine the playing speed of the woodwinds with the sound of the brasses. While the saxophone could be played quickly and easily, it never achieved the sound of the brasses and it was generally dismissed by 19th century musicians as little more than a novelty instrument. Around the turn of the century, the saxophone began to appear in minstrel shows.

But in 1905, Will Marion Cook, who had studied music at Oberlin College in Northeast Ohio, saw the potential for the saxophone and began using it in his dance band. It was apparently the first time the saxophone had been used in popular music.

Cook, who was born in 1869 in Washington, D.C., began studying violin at the Oberlin Conservatory at the age of 13 in 1882 and later studied with Joseph Joachim in Germany and Antonin Dvorak in the United States. He became the first Negro to play with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Seeing little future for an African-American in classical music at the time, Cook focused his attention on popular music. In 1898, he wrote and produced a Broadway musical called Clorindy (or The Origin of the Cakewalk). It was an operetta that included a cast of 26 blacks singing and dancing. It was the first example of performers singing and dancing simultaneously on the Broadway stage. After Clorindy opened, Cook later proudly said, “Negroes at last were on Broadway. Nothing could stop us.”
Critic James Weldon Johnson said Cook was the first competent composer to take what was then known as ragtime and work it out in a musicianly way." Cook's music from *Clorindy* is said to have influenced blues composer W.C. Handy.

Cook also composed such songs as "I'm Coming Virginia," which was later recorded by Bix Beiderbecke, and "Mammy," later an Al Jolson hit. He also helped form the group that eventually became the musicians' union.

In 1919 Cook was leading a band called the Southern Syncopated Orchestra which toured Europe and gave a command performance before King George V of Great Britain. For the tour, Cook hired a young musician named Sidney Bechet to play improvised saxophone solos with the band. Soloing with Cook's band, Bechet became the first master of the jazz saxophone.

It is a stretch to say that Cook's early orchestra played jazz. But there is little doubt that his music was a major step toward jazz -- with such elements as improvisation and vibrated and muted notes.

In the 1920s, Cook met a young pianist from Washington named Duke Ellington. Ellington later wrote in his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, that Cook helped him get started in New York, coached him, and was a strong early influence. Ellington said, "I got most of my instruction riding around Central Park and he'd give me lectures in music. "Cook gave me lectures," said Ellington, "on fundamentals of writing and arranging" that he had learned at Oberlin. Ellington recalled, "I'd sing a melody in its simplest form and he'd stop me and say, 'Reverse your figures.' " According to Ellington, Cook "was a brief but strong influence. Some of the things he used to tell me I never got a chance to use until years later."

Cook's advice, "Don't try to be anybody but yourself," became Ellington's musical credo.

The onetime Oberlin Conservatory student, who contributed so much by introducing the saxophone to popular music, breaking racial barriers, and teaching young Duke Ellington, died in New York, July 19, 1944 at the age of 75.

Noble Sissie

Noble Sissie, who went to high school in Cleveland, was another early contributor who, like Cook, was best known as a popular bandleader.

Sissie moved to Cleveland with his family in 1906 when his father became the minister of Cory Methodist Church, then located at East 35th and Scovill. The 17-year-old Sissie enrolled in Central High School where he played on the baseball and football teams, sang in the school glee club, and was one of Cleveland's first civil rights activists.

In the book *Reminiscing With Sissie and Blake*, Sissie recalled going with a group of white friends to a movie theatre on Erie Street (later renamed East 9th). "When we tried to go in," he said, "they stopped me and told me to sit in the balcony because I was colored." His white friends were angry and persuaded Sissie to file a suit against the theatre. In 1908, young Noble Sissie was awarded $50 in civil rights damages by a Cleveland court.

Before he graduated from Central High School, Sissie was performing professionally. He sang with a male quartet on the Chautauqua circuit around the Midwest. After high school, he went to DePauw University for one semester and transferred to Butler University in Indianapolis. The manager of that city's Severin Hotel asked Sissie to form an orchestra to play for hotel guests. He became the leader of perhaps the first black orchestra to be featured in a hotel catering to white customers. It was the beginning of a pattern that would continue throughout Sissie's life.

During World War I, he entered the Army and became the drum major of an Army band that caused a sensation in France by playing a form of ragtime music. The 369th Infantry Band, led by Lt. James Reese Europe, began calling itself a "jazz band." Reese's Army band not only helped popularize the new music among U.S. soldiers, it was also probably the first exportation of jazz, America's new art form. Sissie said at the time, "The jazz germ hit France and it spread everywhere" they went.
In 1914, Europe led a syncopated orchestra which recorded such songs as “Too Much Mustard” and “Castle Walk.” Some historians, including saxophonist Jackie McLean, in the October, 1990 DownBeat magazine, have argued that those records by James Reese Europe, three years before the first recordings by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, were the first examples of recorded jazz.

Shortly after the war, Sissle became the leader of Europe’s civilian band after a crazed band member attacked Europe with a knife and killed him. It happened at the end of a cross-country tour, May 9, 1919, at Mechanic’s Hall in Boston. Drummer Herbert Wright was angered by Europe’s strict direction. Sissle later recalled, “Jim wrestled Herbert to the ground. I shook Herbert and he seemed like a crazed child, trembling with excitement. Although Jim’s wound seemed superficial, they couldn’t stop the bleeding.” As they rushed Europe to a hospital, he told Sissle, “I leave everything for you to carry on.” The next day, newspapers carried the headline: “The Jazz King is Dead.”

In 1919, when the Sissle-led band was in Chicago and looking for some new musicians, Sissle auditioned a 22-year-old clarinetist from New Orleans named Sidney Bechet. Sissle remembered, “Bechet pulled half of his clarinet from his right coat pocket, half from the left, and his mouthpiece from the inside coat pocket.” According to Sissle, “The instrument’s keys were held together with tape and rubber bands.” But, with the dilapidated instrument, Bechet played a spectacular audition and joined the band despite the fact that he could not read music.

Shortly after he joined the band, Bechet got a more attractive offer. Will Marion Cook was planning to go to Europe and wanted Bechet to go with him as a member of Cook’s orchestra.

Sissle, giving up his band for a while, formed a vaudeville act with pianist and composer Eubie Blake. In 1921, following the lead of Will Marion Cook, they wrote an all-black Broadway review, Shuffle Along. The show launched the career of dancer Josephine Baker. One of the songs in the show was Sissle’s composition “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” a song which 27 years later Harry Truman used in his presidential election campaign. A member of the chorus of Shuffle Along was 19-year-old Fredi Washington who later starred in Duke Ellington’s first film, Black and Tan, and married Ellington trombonist Lawrence Brown.

In 1923, three years before Al Jolson’s The Jazz Singer, the first feature length sound film, Sissle and Blake made one of the first sound motion pictures, a short called “A Phonofilm.” It was first shown at Cleveland’s Palace Theatre December 10, 1923.

After producing several other Broadway shows, Sissle in 1928 went to Paris where he formed another band. He re-hired Bechet and added longtime Ellington band member Toby Hardwick.

Sissle returned to the United States in 1930 and his band became popular in theatres and hotels that catered mainly to white audiences. At one point, Jelly Roll Morton tried unsuccessfully to hire away some of Sissle’s musicians. The band recorded for Brunswick in 1931 and again toured Europe.

When Sissle and his Franco-Harlem Review performed at Cleveland’s Palace Theatre for a week in December of 1934, a member of the band was a singer from Cleveland named Billy Banks.

The following year, Sissle hired a young singer who had been a chorus girl at New York’s Cotton Club. Lena Horne made her first record with Sissle’s orchestra, “That’s What Love Did to Me.” She was singing with the Sissle Orchestra when it returned to Cleveland for another week in October of 1936.

The members of Sissle’s band said his style of leadership was a combination of a stern uncle, a jovial headmaster, and a conscientious sergeant major. His concept of leadership was apparently based on his experience in the Army.
Sissle liked to say he traveled all over the country, including the South, with no racial problems, but Lena Home later said the band members usually had to go in the back doors of most of the hotels where they played and frequently had trouble getting hot meals and taxis.

Sissle, however, was proud that he was the first bandleader to play at venues that had previously hired only white groups.

In the summer of 1936, he was scheduled to break the racial barrier at the Moonlight Gardens ballroom in Cincinnati. On the way to Cincinnati, his car blew a tire near Delaware, Ohio, causing an accident which seriously injured Sissle. From the hospital where he was being treated for a fractured skull, Sissle sent word to his band that young Lena Home should front the band in Cincinnati. Without Sissle, the band continued playing at the ballroom for three weeks.

After recovering from his injuries, Sissle asked the band to play a special concert for the doctors and staff at the Jane Case Hospital in Delaware.

By the late 1930s, despite the presence of Sidney Bechet, Sissle’s Orchestra was being overshadowed by the extremely popular big bands. In 1938, Bechet, who was becoming a star in his own right, left Sissle’s orchestra and soon was considered an all-time master of the soprano saxophone.

In 1942, Sissle hired a 22-year-old saxophonist and clarinetist named Charlie Parker. Bird played with Sissle’s band for nine months at about the same time he first began jamming with Dizzy Gillespie.

Sissle continued leading his band into the 1960s. The musician who grew up in Cleveland died December 17, 1975 in Tampa, Florida. He was 86.

The King Instrument Company

The birth of a company in Cleveland in 1893 had a profound effect on jazz for more than a century. Henderson N. White formed a company near East 53rd and Superior to manufacture trombones. The first were built for a professional trombonist named Thomas King. In honor of the trombonist, White named his firm The King Instrument Company. The Cleveland company soon became famous for its King trombones.

Such all-time great jazz trombonists as George Brunis, Jack Teagarden, Tommy Dorsey and J.J. Johnson played instruments made in Cleveland by King Instruments. Bix Beiderbecke used a H.H. White Company #6 mouthpiece on his cornet.

Over the years, King branched out, manufacturing almost every kind of brass instrument. Other artists who
played King instruments included Harry James, Wild Bill Davison and Cannonball Adderley, as well as the brass players of the Cleveland Orchestra.

In 1964, the company moved to Curtis Boulevard, just off Route 2 in Eastlake, and changed its name to King Musical Instruments.

It was the Cleveland firm that made Dizzy Gillespie’s famous bent-bell trumpet. In 1972, Gillespie visited the King plant in Eastlake and asked designer-engraver Robert Morgan to engrave an intricate floral pattern on his famous trumpet. Later, Morgan, who spent 45 years designing and engraving instruments at King before retiring, received a letter from Gillespie saying, “The job you did is without peer. It is too pretty to play.”

At the King plant, about 250 employees crafted hundreds of instruments each week. Chuck Ward, a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, was the manager of engineering at King. He said King employees made sure the horns “had soul before they were sold.”

While there is much technology involved in making a musical instrument, much of the work is done by hand. Craftsmen who understood both the technology and the artistry of the instrument always tested the new horns.

Stan Matras, a former member of the Baldwin-Wallace College and Louisville orchestras, said it takes only a few seconds to know if the sound of the horn is sweet. He said, “I usually go through a two-octave scale on each instrument and I can tell right away if something is wrong. Each instrument is unique with its own sound.”

In 1985, the company was purchased by United Musical Instruments of Elkhart, Indiana, but continued to make King brand instruments in suburban Cleveland.

In 2000, the company was advertising a “Jiggs Whigham model” trombone, named after the native Cleveland jazz artist, and was still making a Dizzy Gillespie-style trumpet with an upturned bell.

Gillespie’s personal trumpet, engraved in Cleveland by Robert Morgan, was placed on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. The Wickliffe resident said, “I never in my wildest dreams thought this would take place.”

A 1934 advertisement with Tommy Dorsey endorsing a King trombone