By the 1920s, jazz was becoming very popular. Jazz records were flooding the country and jazz dance bands were popping up almost everywhere. Cleveland quickly became a very active city for the new form of music.

Longtime Cleveland Press editor and columnist Julian Krawcheck told me, “If Chicago was the ‘toddling town’ of the 1920s and 1930s, then Cleveland must have been a close runner up. There were literally hundreds of neighborhood spots – bars and nightclubs – which featured jazz or blues music on weekends and some nightly.”

Much of Cleveland’s early jazz was played in the area of the city where blacks were settling. Between 1910 and 1920, the black population of Cleveland increased by 307%. Following World War I, African-Americans migrated north for industrial jobs and many found homes in the Central-Woodland neighborhood of the city.

As early as 1921, blues singer Ethel Waters (with piano accompanist Fletcher Henderson) was singing for black audiences in Cleveland. In 1923, Bessie Smith performed at the Globe Theatre at East 55th and Woodland.

Jazz frowned on by society
The growing popularity of the new music came despite some early opposition by polite society. As the 1920s began, jazz was not an accepted part of the cultural landscape here. Jazz was considered a renegade form of music, almost a social protest, much as rock ‘n roll and rap were in later generations.

In 1918, when the Cleveland Orchestra was formed, the first conductor of the symphonic orchestra, Nikolai Sokoloff, ordered his musicians not to play jazz. He said, “A player cannot do his most beautiful work if he has misused his talent by playing ragtime.” A rule in the musicians’ contract said, “No member of the orchestra shall play at a dance or in a parade.”

In 1925, the City of Cleveland enacted a series of regulations for dance halls which included: “Vulgar, noisy jazz music is prohibited.” The regulation said, “Such music almost forces dancers to use jerky half-steps and invites immoral behavior.”

Other regulations included:
- “Male dancers are not permitted to hold their partners tightly.
- Dancers are not permitted to copy the extremes that are now used on the modern stage.
- Gentlemen must wear coats while dancing.
- Expectorating on the floor is prohibited.
- Suggestive movements are not permitted.
- Partners are not permitted to dance with cheeks close or touching. When dancers put their cheeks together it is simply a case of public love-making.”

But with the growing popularity of the new music called jazz, many of the city regulations became impossible to enforce and were quickly forgotten.

The birthplace of recorded jazz
Phonograph recordings were a key factor in propelling the new and often misunderstood music into the public consciousness in the 1920s.

In 1922, a group of jazz musicians from Chicago, who called themselves the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, went to a rambling brick building on the bank of the White River Gorge, on the edge of Richmond, Indiana – just across the state line from Dayton, Ohio. The building was the factory of the Starr Piano Company which had been making pianos there since 1872.
In 1916, the company also began producing phonographs and phonograph records. The Gennett Records Division was not doing very well because the two giant companies, the American Gramophone Company (which later became Columbia) and the Victor Talking Machine Company (which later became RCA Victor), dominated the business by holding patents on the process of sound recording. Gennett sued Victor and won the right to use the then-new form of lateral cut recording.

Shortly after that court decision, Gennett began recording jazz artists who were performing in Chicago. That first group, including trombonist George Brunis, clarinetist Leon Rappolo and drummer Ben Pollack, went into the tiny recording studio tucked away in a corner of the piano factory. A huge horn protruded through a velvet drape and amplified the music like a cheerleader’s megaphone. The sound waves moved a cutting needle, forming a groove in the master record. The turntable was not run by an electric motor; it was totally mechanical, relying on gravity, in much the same way a grandfather clock is powered. At times, when trains rumbled by outside the factory, they had to stop the recording and start over again.

In this tiny room, just a few miles from Ohio, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings recorded such jazz classics as “Tin Roof Blues,” “Tiger Rag,” and with pianist Jelly Roll Morton, “Clarinet Marmalade.”

The following year, 1923, Joe “King” Oliver, who had taken his Creole Jazz Band from New Orleans to Chicago, went to Richmond April 6 to record for the first time. Baby Dodds, who played drums with the band, said, “Joe got the contract through someone who had heard the band play at the Lincoln Gardens in Chicago.” Oliver’s band took a train from Chicago to Richmond and recorded all day. One of the records the band made was “Chimes Blues,” featuring the first recorded solo by a young cornetist named Louis Armstrong.

Lil Hardin Armstrong, Louis’ wife at the time, later said the band was grouped around the big horn. But, Louis played so loudly, she said, that you couldn’t hear anybody else on the record. They had to move him “way over in the corner, 12 or 15 feet away from the rest of us.”

Aside from Armstrong’s first recorded solo, that 1923 session in Richmond, Indiana, is remembered for a famous shout near the end of “Dippermouth Blues” – “Oh, plaaay that thing!” Dodds admitted that it came about by mistake. Dodds said he was supposed to take a drum break, but forgot. Quick-thinking pianist Bill Johnson covered the goof by yelling, “Oh, plaaay that thing!” When the shout became popular because of the record, Oliver made it a regular part of the arrangement for live performances.

Jelly Roll Morton returned to the Gennett studio in 1923 to make his first solo piano records, including such songs as “Wolverine Blues” and “King Porter Stomp.”

In February of 1924, a young white group which had been playing in Cincinnati and at the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity at nearby Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, went to the Gennett studio to record for the first time. The group was called the Wolverine Orchestra and featured a 20-year-old cornet player named Bix Beiderbecke.

A few weeks earlier, they were playing a New Year’s Eve party at the Stockton Club in nearby Hamilton, Ohio. The young musicians found themselves in the middle of a bloody Prohibition era gang war. A group of bootleggers and some of their gun-happy friends decided to celebrate the new year by shooting each other. In an effort to stop the riot, Bix and the Wolverines are said to have begun playing “China Boy” as loudly and as furiously as possible.

Those first records by Beiderbecke and the Wolverines proved to be commercially successful. Three months later, in May of 1924, they went back to record four more sides, including “Tiger Rag.”

Many of the other early giants of jazz made their first recordings in the 1920s at the Starr Piano Factory in Richmond. They included Sidney Bechet, Muggsy Spanier, Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson. It was also the place where in October of 1927, Hoagy Carmichael made the first of thousands of recordings of his composition “Star Dust.”

In 1928, Gennett cut more than 1,200 master records – an average of more than five every working day. There is no doubt they were extremely important in popularizing jazz. But, during the economic depression of the 1930s, the sales of records dropped dramatically and Gennett Records went out of business. Starr continued producing pianos until 1940.
The first jazz records in Cleveland

By 1923, jazz records were also being made in Cleveland. The Vernon-Owens Hotel Winton Orchestra made several recordings. In February 1925, the Emerson Gill Orchestra, a very popular Cleveland dance band which was playing at the Bamboo Garden at East 100th and Euclid, recorded “Birmingham Bound” in Cleveland for the Okeh Record Company.

In February of 1925, the Emerson Gill Orchestra, a very popular Cleveland dance band which was playing at the Bamboo Garden at East 100th and Euclid, recorded “Birmingham Bound” in Cleveland for the Okeh Record Company. The Bamboo Garden where the Emerson Gill Orchestra played in the 1920s

Cleveland record collector Jim Prohaska discovered another record by the Gill band entitled “My Name Will Always Be Chickie” with, as the label says, “a singing chorus by Pinky Hunter.” Hunter was a popular Cleveland entertainer and a radio pioneer. When a young student at Ohio State University heard about the Okeh recording session in Cleveland, he auditioned his band. Harold Ortli and his Ohio State Collegians recorded two sides — “I Couldn’t Get To It In Time” and “My Daddy Rocks Me.” After college, Ortli formed a band that played for years at the Euclid Beach amusement park. He also operated a music store in Cleveland.

Also recording for Okeh in Cleveland in 1925 was Joe Smith and his Martha Lee Club Orchestra. The Martha Lee Club was located in the Ohio and State Theatre building on Euclid Avenue. The same week that Smith recorded “Nora Lee,” magician Harry Houdini was performing next door at the Palace Theatre.

Cleveland’s Austin Wylie and his Golden Pheasant Orchestra recorded in 1925 for Vocalion Records. They did a song that had been recorded two years earlier by the legendary Coon-Sanders Nighthawks, “I’m Gonna Charleston Back To Charleston.”

Wylie also played another important role in Cleveland jazz history.

“Rock ‘n Roll” Not Coined in Cleveland

Ortli’s 1925 song “My Daddy Rocks Me” might surprise some people who believe the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum was located in Cleveland because 1950s Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed coined the phrase “rock ‘n roll.”

Actually, Freed simply borrowed an old jazz phrase to describe the rhythm and blues or race records he was playing at the time on WJW Radio.

As early as 1927, Louis Armstrong made a record called “Rock Me Mamma With A Steady Roll.” Benny Goodman’s 1935 swing recording of “Get Rhythm In Your Feet” included the phrase “rock ‘n roll.” In 1937, the Bunny Berigan Orchestra recorded a song called “Rockin’ Rollers’ Jubilee.”

Artie Shaw in Cleveland

In 1927, an ambitious 17-year-old from New Haven, Connecticut, arrived in Cleveland to launch his professional music career. Young Artie Shaw came to Cleveland to join Joe Cantor’s band which was playing at the Far East Restaurant on Euclid Avenue.

In his biography, The Trouble With Cinderella, the clarinetist recalled, “One of the things I learned while I was in Cleveland was how to arrange.” One of his first arrangements was “Wabash Blues” and it did not come easily. Instead of writing the overall score on one sheet, Shaw said, “I spread all the parts out on the floor and got down on my hands and knees with a pencil, jotted down a few notes on one part, and crawled around until I located the part I wanted to go with it.” When Cantor’s band first played the arrangement, Shaw said, “It was a mess until the other musicians suggested changes in their parts.”

Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Hank Geer gave me a copy of a photo of the Joe Cantor Orchestra in 1927. It shows Cantor standing at the left and his band.
The Jazz Age in Cleveland

The Joe Cantor Orchestra in 1927:
(L-to-R) Cantor, Charlie Cantor, Chuck Shanks, Vic Buynak, Artie Shaw, unidentified trombonist, Julian Woodward, Willis Kelly and Walt Eastman

members, including Shaw, in a line, dressed in shirts with “JC” on their chests, white knickers, long socks and brown and white oxfords. It almost looks like a page out of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Great Gatsby.

While playing with Cantor’s band in Cleveland, Shaw began to listen to some of the jazz records that had been made by Gennett. In an autobiographical essay he wrote in 1995, Shaw remembered his earliest jazz idols and influences were cornetist Bix Beiderbecke and saxophonist Frank Trumbauer. Bix and “Tram” were playing together with the Jean Goldkette Orchestra and recording on their own. Beiderbecke was to jazz in the late 1920s what Babe Ruth was to baseball. Bix, with an unmatched tone, added lyrical and creative solos to what, for the most part, had been a hard-driving, raucous style of roaring ’20s jazz.

By 1928, Shaw, who had changed his name from Abraham Isaac Arshawsky to Art Shaw (“Art” sounded older than “Artie”), had become a pretty good arranger and was offered a job in Cleveland’s top band of the day, the Austin Wylie Orchestra. The Wylie band was playing eight hours a day – morning, noon and night – at the Golden Pheasant Chinese Restaurant on Prospect Avenue next door to the Hotel Winton (later Carter Manor). Shaw soon became the musical director of Wylie’s band.

Pianist Al Lerner (not the later owner of the Cleveland Browns), who was growing up in Cleveland at the time, recalled Shaw “was kind of a strange guy in Cleveland.” Lerner said Shaw had a bright red car and liked to go to fires. “Shaw just got in line with the fire engines,” he said, “and got to the fires as fast as they did.”

Also in Cleveland, Shaw first heard some so-called “race records,” recordings that were made specifically for sale in Negro neighborhoods. Among the recording artists was Louis Armstrong and particularly the records Armstrong made with his Hot Five. Shaw later said he was “entranced” by Armstrong’s recordings of “West End Blues” and “Savoy Blues.” Armstrong’s music on record excited the young Shaw so much that on a day off from the Wylie band, he hopped into his red roadster and drove from Cleveland to Chicago. He called it “a pilgrimage” to Chicago’s Savoy Ballroom to hear the great trumpet player in person.

In his autobiography, Shaw wrote he fell in love with a Cleveland girl named Betty (he did not disclose her last name). It was the first love for the young man who would later marry a succession of glamorous women including movie stars Lana Turner and Ava Gardner, Betty Kern (the daughter of composer Jerome Kern), Kathleen Windsor and Evelyn Keyes.

One of Shaw’s closest friends in Cleveland was pianist Claude Thornhill. They met during a summer gig at Willy’s Lakeshore Gardens and soon roomed together at the Hotel Winton. Shaw wrote, “We used to take long rides along the lakeshore, gabbing our heads off about everything.” Another member of the Wylie Orchestra was a young Tony Pastor.

In 1929, Shaw entered an essay contest sponsored by the Cleveland News to promote the National Air Races which were just beginning at...
the Cleveland Airport (later Cleveland Hopkins International Airport). Shaw wrote a 150-word essay, “How The National Air Races Would Benefit Cleveland,” and composed a song called “Song of the Skies.” He won the newspaper contest and was awarded an airplane trip to Hollywood.

More than 500,000 people attended the 10-day air races, including Charles Lindbergh who had made his famous solo flight to Paris two years earlier.

On Shaw’s trip to Hollywood, he ran into two friends from New Haven who were playing with Irving Aaronson’s orchestra. They suggested that Shaw join Aaronson’s band. When the band later came to Cleveland, Shaw said, “Aaronson himself came into the Golden Pheasant, listened to me play, and offered me a job.” Because of his Cleveland girlfriend, Shaw didn’t want to leave. But he later wrote, “She sensed my restless ambition and insisted I go to California with Aaronson’s band.”

“The night I left,” said Shaw, “I found it hard to accustom myself to the idea that I was leaving the place where I had lived for the past three years, put down a few tentative roots, worked steadily, made friends, and found myself a girl.”

Shaw left Cleveland in his red Auburn roadster and toured with Aaronson’s orchestra for two years. He returned to Cleveland in February 1931 with the Aaronson band to play a week at the Palace Theatre on the same bill with comedian Milton Berle.

A short time later, Shaw went to New York and became a top studio clarinetist. He played on many important jazz records including Bunny Berigan’s classic “I Can’t Get Started.” He also rejoined his old Cleveland buddy Claude Thornhill who was playing in New York.

In 1936, Shaw also recorded with one of his early jazz idols. With the Frank Trumbauer Orchestra he recorded Fats Waller’s “ Ain’t Misbehavin’.”

Shaw formed his own band in 1937. In 1938, he recorded what he called “a nice little tune from one of Cole Porter’s very few flop shows.” “Begin the Beguine” became a huge hit and helped win Shaw fame, money and beautiful women. By 1939, when he had become one of the most popular band leaders in the world, his band manager was his old boss from Cleveland, Austin Wylie.

Shaw later admitted he found superstardom “uncongenial.” He abruptly left the music business for about a year before forming a new band.

By 1954, at the age of 44, Shaw packed his clarinet away and completely quit the music business. He moved to Spain, then Connecticut and California and spent most of his time writing – books, not music.

Shaw was once asked what epitaph he would like to see on his tombstone. With the crusty humor of an artist in his 80s, Shaw said, “Just two words – ‘Go away!’”

But he could also be charming. After he read the first edition of Cleveland Jazz History, Shaw wrote me a very nice note.

Gene Beecher

Another young musician who came to Cleveland in 1927 was Shaw’s boyhood friend from New Haven, Gene Beecher. As teenagers, they had entered every amateur contest they could find in Connecticut.

One night at a theatre in Waterbury, when Beecher was playing his banjo, a stagehand had forgotten to bring out a chair for him to rest his foot on while playing. Beecher later recalled, “I played with an invisible chair (holding one leg in the air). It was a sensation. Artie and I won first prize!”

Beecher’s family moved to Cleveland at about the same time Shaw came here to join the Joe Cantor band. In 1929, Beecher formed his own band in Cleveland. It played at hotels and restaurants in Cleveland and across the Midwest and South until the early 1940s. Beecher recalled when he was doing national radio broadcasts from a Chinese restaurant in Cleveland, he would frequently receive sheet music from song pluggers with a 20-dollar bill enclosed.

His band was more a dance band than a jazz band. He later said that in the 1930s he was impressed by the “rippling rhythm” style of Shep Fields and attempted to copy it. At another point in his career, Beecher billed himself as “Gene Beecher, the Music Teacher.” He set up a chalk board on the bandstand and had his band members wear mortarboards.

After World War II, Beecher opened a music store and school in South Euclid. In the 1970s, he sold his farm in Jefferson and moved to Florida where he became a very successful painter, showing his folk art creations in a number of leading galleries.

In their older years, Beecher and Shaw continued to correspond with each other and recall their early days in New Haven and Cleveland.

Beecher died in Florida September 23, 2002 at age 93.

Claude Thornhill

Pianist Claude Thornhill left Cleveland to join Hal Kemp’s touring band and then the Ray Noble Orchestra where he met Glenn Miller.
Eventually, Thornhill went to New York where he played studio dates for hundreds of records. He arranged and conducted the orchestra for singer Maxine Sullivan's now-classic recording of "Loch Lomond." That 1936 record established Thornhill's reputation among musicians.

Two years later, he arranged for the Bing Crosby radio show. By 1940, with a batch of 60 new arrangements and a loan from Miller, Thornhill formed his own orchestra.

He composed the haunting "Snowfall," which he used as his theme song, and set out to revolutionize big band music. But, success did not come easily for Thornhill.

The band's first date at Virginia Beach, Virginia, was canceled when the swank ballroom burned to the ground. A gig at a San Francisco hotel ended quickly because the hotel manager said he wanted what he called "a Mickey Mouse dance band." In Hartford, when Thornhill's band members showed up, they found the doors of the ballroom padlocked. The manager had fled with the money. To add insult to injury, when Thornhill returned to his hotel, the desk clerk called him "Mr. Toenail."

But finally, two months later, he took his band to the Glen Island Casino outside New York City and scored a major success.

Thornhill's orchestra featured unique arrangements that combined the romance of classical music with some daring jazz innovations and made full use of the dynamics of a big orchestra. He also hired some excellent musicians. Among them were lead trumpeter Conrad Gozzo, clarinetist Irving Fazola, and future jazz greats Lee Konitz and Red Rodney. They played such unusual Thornhill compositions as "Portrait of a Guinea Farm."

By the summer of 1942, a young arranger named Gil Evans joined Thornhill's orchestra. This was the same Gil Evans who would later be such an important part of Miles Davis' career. For Thornhill, Evans arranged the popular "There's a Small Hotel" and "Buster's Last Stand" which established the Thornhill Orchestra as an outstanding modern jazz band.

In the fall of 1942, during World War II, Thornhill went into the Navy and played piano in a service band led by his old roommate from Cleveland, Artie Shaw. When Thornhill got out of the Navy, he rounded up many of the members of his old band including Evans and reorganized his orchestra.

Evans wrote a piece called "Arab Dance" which was a combination of his interests in progressive jazz and European classical music.

The post-war Thornhill Orchestra was not a conventional big band. You couldn't call it a bop band or a swing band or a sweet band. It was unique.

I remember one night dancing to the Thornhill Orchestra at the Sunnybrook Ballroom in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and thinking the band was playing pretty dance music. Then, suddenly, out there on the dance floor, I realized that this big, beautiful orchestra was also playing a lot of jazz, in a very different way! I quickly recognized Charlie Parker's "Anthropology." Thornhill began it with a piano solo in a style that John Lewis would later use with the Modern Jazz Quartet. Lee Konitz took a sax solo that reminded me of Parker.

Someone once asked Gerry Mulligan to compare Thornhill and Stan Kenton. He said, "They were probably exact opposites. Thornhill was an introvert. His music was very artistically oriented. He was much drawn to the impressionists. Kenton, on the other hand, was an extrovert and his music was very extroverted and his musical heroes would be more like Richard Wagner." Said Mulligan, "The Kenton band was very muscular and physical; the Thornhill band was spiritual and cerebral and sensitive."

Pianist Thelonious Monk, after hearing the Thornhill Orchestra, said it was "the only really good big band I've heard in years."

By the mid-1950s, when big bands were beginning to fall by the wayside, Thornhill quietly disappeared. The introverted musician suffered an emotional collapse. He bought a home in New Jersey and became a gardener and home handyman while playing only a few occasional gigs.

In 1965, at the age of 56, Thornhill was forming a new band when he suffered two heart attacks. When he died, Duke Ellington said, "I wonder if the world will ever know how much it had in this beautiful man. There aren't many of his kind left."

The Fletcher Henderson Orchestra

While Claude Thornhill and Artie Shaw were playing in Cleveland, Fletcher Henderson brought his swinging big band to town for the first time. It was in July of 1927. Included in the band, which was blazing the trail for the swing era, was saxophonist Coleman Hawkins. The Henderson band broke with the earlier practice of orchestras led by such people as Will Marion Cook and Noble Sissle.
Cleveland Jazz History

which played mostly stock arrangements. **Henderson’s orchestra was one of the first big bands to play its own compositions and arrangements instead of stock arrangements.** Historian Frank Driggs called the Henderson Orchestra “the single most important musical force in big band history.”

A native of Cuthbert, Georgia, Henderson had first come to Northeast Ohio in 1921 when he was leading a band for the Black Swan Record Company, backing singer Ethel Waters in a series of one-night gigs in Cleveland, Akron, Youngstown and Mansfield.

Henderson formed his own band in 1923 and insisted on using only the best musicians. Over the years, they included such future jazz giants as Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, Buster Bailey, Fats Waller, Lester Young, Don Redman, Rex Stewart and Cootie Williams. Henderson also permitted his musicians to freely interpret the original compositions and arrangements they were playing. With this policy, Henderson’s band laid the foundation for the swing era.

By the late 1920s, Henderson’s band was an acknowledged leader in big band jazz.

When the Henderson band appeared in Cleveland in June of 1929, it was led by his younger brother, Horace Henderson, a graduate of Ohio’s Wilberforce University. Fletcher was recovering from injuries he received in an auto accident. Henderson suffered a broken collarbone, a long gash on his forehead and paralysis of his left side. Led by Horace, the band played at the Crystal Slipper Ballroom, then Cleveland’s largest and finest dance hall, at 9802 Euclid Avenue. Five years later, the name of ballroom was changed to the Trianon Ballroom.

The early 1930s were lean years for the Henderson Orchestra. It made several excellent recordings and, while tours were scarce, the band did travel to Cleveland several times.

In February of 1930, Henderson’s band was at Oster’s Ballroom on East 105th Street. That band featured trumpeters Cootie Williams and Rex Stewart and saxophonists Benny Carter and Coleman Hawkins.

Late in 1931, with such sidemen as trombonist Jimmy Harrison and saxophonists Russell Procope and Carter, the band spent a month playing at Cleveland’s old Hollenden Hotel at East 6th and Superior. The palatial old Hollenden had been built in 1885 and had been considered the hotel between New York and Chicago. Its guest book included the names of Presidents William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt,
Red Callender in Cleveland

A 17-year-old bass player who had grown up in Atlantic City, New Jersey, came to Cleveland in 1933. Red Callender, in his autobiography Unfinished Dream, recalled he was playing with a vaudeville troupe called Eddie Hunter’s Black and White Review. Their bus broke down halfway between Harrisburg and Cleveland. When they finally got here, they discovered their show had been canceled, but they played at various spots for about a week before Hunter disappeared without paying his musicians. Callender said they stayed in a Cleveland rooming house “on credit.” A few weeks later, after his father drove to Cleveland with some money for his son, Callender took a bus back home. But he returned to Cleveland a year later.

Callender, who later became one of the most sought-after bass players in jazz, spent 1934 and 1935 here, playing with Jimmy Darrow’s big band. He called Darrow “a high-note trumpet player without a lot of business sense.”

Callender recalled, “Fletcher Henderson’s band was in town, with Pops Foster on bass, Roy Eldridge on trumpet and Coleman Hawkins on tenor saxophone.” According to Callender, they all came to Henry’s Furnace to jam when their gigs were over, and after the paying customers went home. He said, “I became a Coleman Hawkins fan right there on the spot (at the Majestic Hotel), and always will be. Never had I heard anything like that before.”

He said Roy Eldridge was about 19 years old then and they struck up a friendship. “We wore long overcoats that dragged along the ground,” said Red, “but never wore a hat because that was considered ‘sissified.’” He said Eldridge carried his trumpet in a case slung over his shoulder by a strap “and I’d trail along with him all over town. He was a bundle of energy, effervescent, entirely wrapped up in music. No one played as high or fast as Roy until Diz dethroned him as king.” Callender said Eldridge was the person who took him to Mamie Louise’s Chicken Shack in Cleveland to see and hear Harry Edison, a young trumpeter from Columbus who was playing with Chester Clark’s band. According to Callender, “Edison’s style was fully developed even at the age of 18.”

It was Eldridge who took Callender to first hear pianist Art Tatum at a Cleveland after-hours joint before Eldridge left Cleveland with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra.

In 1935, two years after he had first come to Cleveland, Callender joined another band formed by Jimmy Darrow and played in Mansfield. There he met a piano player from Columbus named Logan “Lord” Hawkins, who got him a job with a band led by Roderick Ray at the Gloria Nightclub in Columbus. From there, he went on the road with Blanche Thompson, and in 1936, at the age of 20, ended up in Los Angeles playing with Buck Clayton’s band. After studying with two
classical bass violinists, Callender made his first record, with Louis Armstrong’s Orchestra, “Once In A While” and “On The Sunny Side of the Street.”

At about the same time, Callender wrote two tunes, “Love Lost” and “Bogo Joe,” which were recorded by Lionel Hampton. He gave bass lessons to a teenager named Charlie Mingus and showed Mingus how to develop a powerful, penetrating tone on the bass. From 1940 to 1943, Callender played in the band of Lee and Lester Young. He formed his own group in 1944, and in 1946, appeared in a movie called *New Orleans* with Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday.

In the 1950s, Callender, who had settled in Los Angeles, was a highly-sought-after studio musician and played many dates with native Cleveland arranger Ernie Freeman. He also recorded with the Mills Brothers.

In the mid-1950s, Callender recorded with the pianist he had first met at an after-hours club in Cleveland, Art Tatum.

In the 1960s, Callender became a NBC staff musician in Los Angeles and recorded with dozens of groups including Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, and even Percy Faith’s big, lush elevator music orchestra.

In 1971, Callender’s California home was destroyed by an earthquake, but he continued playing, recording, teaching, composing and arranging.

When he returned to Cleveland in 1991 with Jimmy and Jeannie Cheatham’s Sweet Baby Blues Band to play a Northeast Ohio Jazz Society concert at Cain Park, Red Callender remembered those days 58 years earlier when he first arrived in Cleveland and met and played with Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge and Art Tatum.

Eight months after that Cleveland appearance, March 8, 1992, Callender died of thyroid cancer at age 76.

**Emmett Berry with Henderson**

When Roy Eldridge left the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra in 1936, he was replaced by Clevelander Emmett Berry.

Influenced originally by Louis Armstrong, Berry played with local bands in Cleveland in the early 1930s and went on the road in 1932 with a band led by Frank Terry of Toledo. With Terry, Berry began to demonstrate a fiery, full-toned and flawless technique that would carry him on a 40-year career with many of the most respected musicians in jazz.

He spent three years with the high-flying Henderson band and produced a series of warm, uncomplicated solos on such recordings as “Stealin’ Apples,” “Christopher Columbus,” “Blue Lou,” “Rhythm of the Tambourine,” “Back in Your Own Backyard,” “Chris And His Gang,” and “Sing You Sinners.”

After Henderson broke up his band to join Benny Goodman, Berry played briefly with Henderson’s brother, Horace, and then joined the Earl Hines Orchestra.

Beginning in 1941, Berry played radio, recording and live dates with Teddy Wilson’s Café Society Sextet and joined a much-publicized CBS studio band led by Raymond Scott. In 1943, Berry joined the Lionel Hampton band. In 1944, he played with the legendary John Kirby Sextet and recorded with Eddie Heywood. The Clevelander played the trumpet solo on Heywood’s classic recording of “Begin the Beguine.”

Beginning in 1945, Berry was a key member of the Count Basie Orchestra and small groups for five years. He later toured with the Johnny Hodges Orchestra.

Berry was not swayed by the advent of bop. He continued to play the straight-ahead swing style he had learned with Henderson.

In 1970, because of ill health, Berry came home to Cleveland to retire.

**Jimmy Williams and Henderson**

A graduate of Cleveland’s Central High School, Jimmy Williams was playing trombone with a World War II big band at the Portage Ordanance Depot at the Ravenna Arsenal when a friend named Joe Thomas persuaded him to join the 1940s Fletcher Henderson Orchestra.

“Man, this is great,” said Williams as he began touring the country with Henderson. “I wasn’t making too much money, but I got into the swing of things. I didn’t goof it up or anything.”

Before long, the college-educated Henderson realized that Williams was a talented musician and he began giving the Clevelander more and more responsibilities in the band. “I would rehearse them and everything,” recalled Williams. “It seemed as though Fletcher was tired all the time. He would call a two o’clock rehearsal and I’d get the guys together and we’d start rehearsing.”

Williams also arranged for the Henderson Orchestra. One day, when Williams was sitting at a piano, working on a chart, Henderson walked up behind him and said, “I just wanted to see what a good arranger does when he’s putting an arrangement together.” Williams thought the master big band arranger was pulling his leg. But Henderson sat down, went through the arrangement with him and said, “I like that. You seem to have an idea of what you’re shooting for.” Williams said to himself, “He wasn’t kidding. He was serious about me being a good arranger.”

**Bix in Ohio and Cleveland**

A number of key events in the triumph and tragedy of Bix Beiderbecke, the legendary cornetist whose art influenced generations of jazz musicians, occurred in Ohio.

From 1924 to 1927, Beiderbecke astounded the jazz
world with his clarion tone and revolutionary easy-swinging musical figures that bridged the eras of New Orleans jazz and swing. His recordings, still highly prized, personified what was called “The Jazz Age.” But, like his contemporary, writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, Beiderbecke was losing a battle with alcohol.

For two months at the end of 1923, Bix was playing with the Wolverine Orchestra at a bootlegging and gambling roadhouse, the Stockton Club, in Hamilton, Ohio, 20 miles north of Cincinnati.

According to Philip Evans, in his exhaustive chronology of Beiderbecke’s life, *Bix: The Leon Bix Beiderbecke Story*, the Wolverines then began playing at Doyle’s Dancing Academy in Cincinnati and at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Those gigs led to Beiderbecke’s first recordings.

It was Monday, February 18th, 1924. Bix and the Wolverines went to the Starr Piano Company in Richmond, Indiana, just over the Ohio line from Dayton, and recorded for Gennett Records. The first record was the old New Orleans Rhythm Kings’ song, “Fidgety Feet.” The recording session also included Beiderbecke’s first recorded solo.

Gennett invited Bix and the Wolverines to return to Richmond in May and June for more recordings.

After playing during the summer of 1924 at Lake Front Park in Gary, Indiana, Bix and the Wolverines set out for New York City in three cars. Ralph Burton, in his book, *Remembering Bix*, said they reached Cleveland long after midnight and checked into what he called “a shabby hotel with a bare electric bulb hanging in the middle of the room, overlooking Lake Erie.”

When they finally arrived in New York, they played at the Cinderella Dance Hall at 48th and Broadway and again recorded for Gennett.

On the basis of his records with the Wolverines, Bix was offered a job with the popular Jean Goldkette Orchestra in Detroit. He played on a series of radio broadcasts with Goldkette and, in January of 1925, recorded again in Richmond, Indiana with his own group, The Rhythm Jugglers, which included trombonist Tommy Dorsey.

With the Goldkette Orchestra, Beiderbecke played a series of dates in Ohio in April of 1927 – at a General Motors convention in Dayton, at the Greystone Dance Hall in Dayton, at the Valley Dale Ballroom in Columbus, and at a charity ball at the Neil House hotel in Columbus. From late May (when Charles Lindbergh made his historic non-stop solo flight of the Atlantic) until early July, Bix and the Goldkette band played at Castle Farms in Cincinnati.

In October of 1927, Beiderbecke and Goldkette saxophonist Frank Trumbauer joined the most popular band in the country at the time, the Paul Whiteman Orchestra.

During the fall of 1927, Beiderbecke and the Whiteman Orchestra played at Land O’ Dance in Canton, Madison Gardens in Toledo, and for a week in December at the Allen Theatre in downtown Cleveland.

Other members of the Whiteman Orchestra at the time included Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Henry Busse and singer Bing Crosby. The Cleveland *Press* carried a cartoon drawing of Bix and reviewer Billie Thomas wrote, “To my way of thinking, no child should be started in life without being brought up on this kind of music.”

In February of 1928, Bix and the Whiteman band played in Youngstown. In September, they performed at Rainbow Gardens in Erie and at the Land O’ Dance Ballroom in Canton. While in Canton, the band members organized an unusual golf match. Clarinetist Irving Friedman recalled, “Each foursome would start at the first
The Paul Whiteman Orchestra in 1928. Beiderbecke is in the back row, third from right.

hole with two quarts of whiskey. The two low men on each hole would take a drink. Needless to say, it wasn’t too long before the winners were losers and vice versa. While we staggered in after losing golf balls and clubs all over the course, Bix was as fresh as he was when we started."

In November of 1928, Bix and the Whiteman Orchestra returned to Cleveland to play at the then-new Music Hall at East 6th and St. Clair. Bix opened the show playing “Tiger Rag” with a dixieland group and later played in the brass section during Ferde Grofé’s arrangement of George Gershwin’s “Concerto in F.”

But, fellow band member Charles Margulis recalled, “Bix had too much to drink before the concert and passed out as we were playing.” Margulis said he continued playing his trumpet with his left hand while holding up Bix with his right hand. Whiteman saw what was happening and immediately had Beiderbecke taken back to the Hotel Cleveland. Thomas King, in his book *Pops: Paul Whiteman, King of Jazz*, said, “In Cleveland, Bix suffered a devastating mental and physical breakdown triggered by his growing dependence on alcohol.” Frank Trumbauer’s diary noted Bix’s breakdown in Cleveland. Pianist Roy Bargy said Whiteman left Bix in Cleveland under a doctor’s care.

The band went on to Columbus, Cincinnati and Akron without Bix. Trumbauer’s diary entry for December 2, 1928 said, “Bix still gone. Stayed in Cleveland with DTs.” Beiderbecke rejoined the Whiteman Orchestra in New York in time to record. But, three days later, Whiteman had him admitted to a hospital on Long Island with pneumonia.

It is not clear if Bix was back with the band when it came to Cleveland in January of 1929 for a week’s engagement at the Palace Theatre. There were four shows a day, at 2:20, 4:45, 7:20 and 9:45. An ad in the Cleveland *Press* said Whiteman “turned ‘em away by the thousands.” *Press* reviewer George Davis said, “Whiteman’s fine band pleases crowds.” But Davis also noted that “one of his best musicians (Bix) was absent.”

Biographer Jean-Pierre Lion believes Beiderbecke was not with the band this time in Cleveland, but biographers Richard Sudhalter and Philip Evans wrote that after their opening performance, the other band members returned to the Hotel Cleveland and found Beiderbecke had wrecked his room. It was apparently his second breakdown in Cleveland in less than two months! Trombonist Bill Rank said, “He cracked up, just went to pieces.” Bix apparently suffered an alcoholic fit. Pianist Bargy said, “It was a breakdown, a major one!”

The Cleveland *Press*, apparently after talking with somebody with the Whiteman band, reported Bix was
going home to Davenport, Iowa for a rest. He may have sneaked out of the hotel, past the new Terminal Tower that was under construction, and gone down near Lake Erie to take a train to New York City.

Several weeks later, after Whiteman had hired a replacement for Bix and returned to New York, Bix was found in a New York hotel room, badly beaten and slashed. He had apparently gotten into a fight with some sailors at a speakeasy. This time, Whiteman sent him home to Davenport to rest—on full salary.

After the rest, Beiderbecke rejoined the Whiteman Orchestra and returned to Cleveland in May of 1929 to play at radio station WHK’s auditorium. Later that same day, the band also played in Toledo and Detroit.

In a few months, Bix’s health got worse and he left the Whiteman Orchestra. He played a few dates with several other bands and made a few more records. But his great artistry had been consumed.

Beiderbecke died August 6, 1931 in New York at the age of 28.

Almost forgotten is the fact that key events in Bix Beiderbecke’s early triumphs occurred in Ohio and key events in his eventual tragedy occurred in downtown Cleveland.

Jimmie Lunceford’s start here

Jimmie Lunceford and his Orchestra

Also in 1929, a high school athletic director from Manassas High School in Memphis decided to begin a new career as a bandleader. Jimmie Lunceford brought his group of young musicians, some of whom had been members of his sports teams, to Cleveland.

But the black band had trouble scoring here. White bands were getting most of the gigs. Lunceford’s first professional band played some summer engagements at Lakeside near Kelly’s Island, but generally bombed in Northern Ohio. They later said they spent months of “near-starvation” in the Cleveland area. They moved to Buffalo and finally scored a big success at Cornell University in May of 1933. That night they figuratively blew the other band off the bandstand. The other band was a Cleveland band led by Guy Lombardo. That prom date led to a booking for Lunceford’s band at the Lafayette Theatre in New York City and the Cotton Club in Harlem where young Lena Horne was a chorus girl. Within a year, Lunceford hired a young arranger and trumpeter from Zanesville, Ohio named Sy Oliver. Oliver’s arrangements, including “Organ Grinder’s Swing,” pushed Lunceford to worldwide fame. Earlier, Oliver had arranged for the Zach Whyte territory band that had played frequently in Cleveland.

Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Tommy Allen, who toured with Whyte, said when he was with Whyte’s band he played many of Oliver’s arrangements that most people later associated with the colorful, well-rehearsed Lunceford band.

For years, the Lunceford Orchestra traveled about 40,000 miles a year, including many return visits to Cleveland.

Trumpeters Gerald Wilson and Snooky Young were playing in a Cleveland band in 1939 when Lunceford
hired them for his band. Wilson and Young first played with Lunceford at the Trianon Ballroom on Euclid Avenue. Wilson toured with Lunceford for four years and wrote such classics as “Hi Spook” and “Yard Dog Mazurka.” In 1948, Wilson became a member of the Count Basie Orchestra, joining Clevelander Emmett Berry in the trumpet section. Later, Wilson played with Dizzy Gillespie.

During the 1940s, the Lunceford band included several musicians from Cleveland – Freddie Webster, Harry “Pee Wee” Jackson and Jimmy Williams. Williams was just beginning to learn how to play the trombone at Cleveland’s Central High School in the late 1930s when he heard some music on the radio that would have a lasting effect on his life. It was the Lunceford Orchestra playing “My Blue Heaven.”

“What is that?!” he asked himself. “I never heard anything like that before!”

Williams’ dream of playing with the Lunceford band became a reality a few years later. When Lunceford hired the young trombonist from Cleveland, he suggested that he listen to and watch the band before going on stage for the first time. But, Williams, who had been listening to all the Lunceford records, was confident he could play the book without hearing the band in person. He was shocked when they played the first number.

“I hit the first note,” said Williams, “and I didn’t hear another note the rest of the night. They were so damned loud! Those trumpets behind me! Man, they blasted!”

Traveling with the Lunceford Orchestra in the 1940s was a constant series of one-night gigs – playing, riding the bus, and often staying in cheap hotels. He said, “It seemed like we covered ten thousand miles in three days.”

Besides playing swinging big band jazz, the Lunceford Orchestra also put on an entertaining show. It was fun to watch the trumpeters waving their derby mutes and the trombonists waving their slides in unison as they played. Williams remembered one little show business stunt of the band. “We’d throw our slide out,” he said, “and then, it came back up without pulling it up. That was always pretty cute.” He explained that he flicked the slide real fast with his finger when the audience was watching the end of the slide. “It just appeared,” he said, “that the slide would come all the way back up all by itself.”

While traveling around the country, Lunceford frequently hitched rides for his band on military planes. Williams didn’t like to fly and had some frightening memories of what he called “young devil-may-care Army pilots.”

“One time,” he recalled, “We were landing and the pilot missed the wires by about that much. And when he hit the tarmac, we bounced. The wing almost hit the ground. I thought I was going to be a statistic.”

Williams, who had a wife and child at home in Cleveland, soon tired of the rigors of touring the country.

“I liked it,” he said, “but it wasn’t what I thought it would be. When you’re on the outside looking in, you have a perception that it’s better than it actually is.” Looking back, Williams said the life of a touring band member “is a vagrant’s life.”

Williams decided to come home to Cleveland. He pawned a ring for fifteen dollars, bought a train ticket, and took the train to the old Pennsylvania Railroad station at East 55th and Euclid, near the home where his wife and son were living.

He spent years driving a Cleveland Transit System bus and leading his own band here.

Williams may have been smarter than he realized at the time. A few years later (in 1947), Lunceford was killed in a plane crash.

Red Nichols on Prospect Avenue

In January of 1932, Red Nichols was leading a dance band at the Golden Pheasant Chinese Restaurant on Prospect Avenue, the same restaurant where Artie Shaw had played with the Austin Wylie Orchestra. Every night the Nichols band broadcast nationally on the CBS radio network.

Nichols was one of the biggest names in jazz when he came to Cleveland. He had played with Paul Whiteman’s big orchestra and later said the greatest honor he ever received was being replaced in the Whiteman Orchestra by Bix Beiderbecke.

In the three years before coming to Cleveland, Nichols had made dozens of enormously popular jazz records with the group he called “Red Nichols and his Five Pennies.” Among the sidemen who had recorded with him were Benny Goodman, Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Bud Freeman, Adrian Rollini, Gene Krupa and
Jack Teagarden. They all went on to become some of the biggest names of the swing era.

But after his stint in Cleveland, Nichols’ music became more and more commercial and he gradually faded from the public consciousness.

Billy Banks

In 1932, Irving Mills, the businessman who helped build the Lunceford and Duke Ellington Orchestras, heard a singer in Cleveland named Billy Banks. Mills took Banks to New York City and got him an engagement at Connie’s Inn in Harlem.

Before long, Banks was recording for Brunswick Records. Mills made Banks the front man of a group called the Rhythmakers. The group included such future jazz greats as trumpeter Henry “Red” Allen, reedman Pee Wee Russell, pianist Fats Waller, banjoist Eddie Condon, bassist Pops Foster, and drummer Zutty Singleton. With so much young jazz talent, the 1932 records by Billy Banks’ Rhythmakers, one of the first racially-mixed recording groups, were billed as “the hottest jazz ever recorded.”

They recorded “The Scat Song,” “Oh! You Sweet Thing,” “I Would Do Most Anything For You,” “Mean Old Bed Bug Blues,” “Yellow Dog Blues,” “Yes, Suh!” and other songs. The Clevelander, who sang high-pitched, intense vocals, was 24 years old at the time.

Banks was born in Alton, Illinois, and moved to Cleveland where his family operated a shoe store.

Not long after the recordings, Banks returned to Cleveland. In 1934, he joined the big band of Cleveland Noble Sissle and toured the world and made several records with Sissle’s Orchestra including “Characteristic Blues.”

From 1938 to 1950, Banks was a featured cabaret performer at Billy Rose’s Diamond Horseshoe nightclub. According to John Chilton’s Who’s Who of Jazz, Banks did 7,151 consecutive performances at the club. By 1952, he was working in a variety show, touring Europe, including Holland, France and Great Britain, where he recorded with Freddy Randall’s band. After performing in Asia and Australia, Banks settled in Japan.

Banks died in Tokyo in October 1967 at the age of 59.