6. Count Basie’s Cleveland Connections

William Basie, pianist and bandleader, was not a Clevelander, but he certainly performed frequently in Cleveland and hired a number of Clevelanders to play in his swinging band. Basie’s strongest tie to Cleveland is frequently forgotten. He married a girl from Cleveland and their only child was born here.

Catherine Morgan Basie
Catherine Morgan left Cleveland at the age of 16 in 1931 to become a dancer. She joined a very popular vaudeville act, the Whitman Sisters. She was one of three girls in the dance company who called themselves “The Snake Hips Queens.” When they appeared at the Lafayette Theatre in New York City, there was a jazz band from Kansas City on the same bill. The young dancer from Cleveland noticed the young piano player with the Bennie Moten band. But they didn’t meet.

By 1935, she was working as a fan dancer at the Club Harlem and again ran into that piano player. This time he poked his head into her dressing room. She screamed, “Hey, somebody come here! That piano player with Bennie Moten’s band, I caught him trying to peep behind my fans!”

He quickly retreated and she didn’t see him again until a year later. By this time, the piano player had become the leader of the band and was playing at the Famous Door in New York City. The dancer from Cleveland was working across the street at Leon and Eddie’s nightclub. After her show, she slipped into the Famous Door to listen to the band. Occasionally the piano player would wave, smile, or just poke his finger toward her. But they still had never spoken a word to each other.

Later that summer in Atlantic City, she saw him again. He just pointed his finger at her like he was going to shoot her and winked. This time, they finally chatted. After talking with her most of the afternoon, he again pointed his finger and said, “One of these days I’m going to make you my wife!” She shook her head as she left and said to herself, “That bandleader is crazy!”

But when she got back to New York, she returned to the Famous Door to hear the band and see the leader. A few months later in Detroit, two of her friends finally formally introduced her to William “Count” Basie. She smiled. He pointed his finger at her and said, “Bam!” It was almost ten years after their paths had first crossed.

In his autobiography, Good Morning Blues, Basie recalled he married the girl from Cleveland in 1943 in Seattle. Their honeymoon was a series of one-night band appearances.

The Basie band was working in New York when Katy was about to have a baby. She returned to Cleveland and stayed with her parents. Katy and Bill Basie’s only child, Diane Basie, was born in Cleveland. He rushed to Cleveland to be with his wife and daughter.

Later, when they rejoined Basie in New York, he said he had vivid memories of seeing Katy getting off the plane from Cleveland carrying their baby. He said, “It was a special thrill bringing my family home from the airport that day, Old Base, his wife and daughter.”

They moved into an apartment building near New York’s Central Park. Former Clevelander Earle Warren and his wife lived in the same building and became Diane’s godparents. The baby was baptized by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell a few years before he became a congressman.

As Basie’s band was setting the international standard for swinging jazz, the former dancer from Cleveland was handling many of Count’s personal affairs. While he was on the road, she bought their new home in the Jamaica section of Queens. In the 1950s, he opened a club called “Count Basie’s” at 7th Avenue and 132nd Street. It was losing money until Katy personally took over and turned it into a profitable operation. When Basie’s father died, Count was playing in England and Katy made all the arrangements. In his autobiography Count said, “She really knew how to get things done.”

In 1960, she was active in the political campaign of John Kennedy and took part in one of the inaugural balls. Cleveland native Catherine Morgan Basie died in 1983. Basie died a year later.

Several key members of the Basie band had strong ties to Cleveland.

Earle Warren
A native of Springfield, Ohio, Earle Warren came to Cleveland in 1933 at the age of 19 to play with the seven-piece Marion Sears Orchestra at Cedar Gardens at East 97th and Cedar.

Warren left the Cleveland band in 1937 to join the band of Sears’ brother, Al, in Cincinnati. That’s where
Count Basie saxophonist Herschel Evans first heard him. On Evans’ recommendation, Basie hired Warren in April of 1937, just months after the saxophonist had been playing in Cleveland. His starting salary with Basie was $6.25 a night.

Warren led the Basie sax section that included Evans and Lester Young. With musicians like Young, Buck Clayton and Harry “Sweets” Edison in the band, Warren did not solo often. He said, “I got all the bridges, eight bars in the middle of everything.” But Basie said Warren made an important contribution as the leader of the reed section. Warren also composed for the band. With Buster Harding, a Cleveland, who had also played in the Marion Sears band, Warren wrote “9:20 Special.” Warren also sang ballads with the Basie band, including “You Betcha My Life.” Earle and his wife, Clara, became close friends of Bill and Katy Basie. Except for a hiatus in the 1940s, Warren remained with the orchestra from 1937 until 1950 when Basie was forced to disband his orchestra.

Warren later became the business manager for such performers as Johnny Otis and Eddie Heywood. In the late 1950s, he directed a number of shows including stage shows for disc jockey Alan Freed who had gone to New York from Cleveland. In the 1970s Warren formed a group of Basie band alumni to play for colleges and jazz groups. In the 1980s, he spent much of his time in Europe playing mostly Basie material.

Harry "Sweets" Edison

Almost forgotten is the fact that Harry "Sweets" Edison, another key member of the Basie Orchestra, also began his jazz career in Cleveland.

Six months after he was born in 1915 in Columbus, Edison’s parents broke up and he was raised by his mother. The boy soon began listening to the 1920s records of blues singer Bessie Smith and trumpeter Louis Armstrong. He was fascinated by the early Armstrong records and asked his mother to buy him a trumpet. Money was tight in the household, but when Harry was 12, she bought him his first trumpet for 25 cents down and payments for the full price of $7.

One night when Armstrong was playing in Columbus, young Edison couldn’t afford a ticket but he managed to sneak in to hear his hero. He was hooked.

He never took a formal music lesson, but taught himself to play the trumpet and began playing with several Columbus area jazz bands.

When he was 18 (in 1933), Edison came to Cleveland to play with a band led by Chester Clark. Bassist Red Callender, also a member of that band, said, “Edison’s style was fully developed even at the age of 18 when he was playing in Cleveland.”

Edison also toured with the Cleveland-based Jeter-Pillars territory band. Soon, he sat in with Benny Moten and then joined a highly-regarded territory band led by Alphonso Trent.

At the age of 22 (in 1937), Edison went to New York and played for about six months with the Lucky Millinder band. While he was not a good reader, he learned quickly and managed to play the written arrangements with the band.

Then in September of 1937, Edison joined the Count Basie Orchestra where he was a key member for 13 years.

“When I joined the Basie band,” Edison told an interviewer for DownBeat magazine, “we didn’t have any written scores. Everything was head arrangements.” Replacing Karl George, Edison joined Buck Clayton and Ed Lewis in the Basie trumpet section. He admitted he had trouble at first playing the head arrangements after playing written arrangements with the Millinder and Trent bands. After a few weeks, he wanted to quit, but changed his mind when Basie told him, “You’re playing good, you sound good.”

Before long, Edison was an accepted member of the Basie band. Another member of the band, saxophonist Lester Young, after hearing Edison’s sweet trumpet style, began calling Edison “Sweets.”

Other members of that Basie band included Herschel Evans, Walter Page, Jo Jones, Dicky Wells, Chu Berry, singer Jimmy Rushing, and saxophonist Earle Warren.

Edison called playing with the Basie Orchestra “the highlight of my life, an experience I wouldn’t trade for the world. There wasn’t much money,” said Edison, “and it was rough traveling
from one-nighter to one-nighter, sometimes as much as 500 miles a night, but it was a lot of fun.”

Edison was also a frequent prankster. Once he secretly loosened the strings of Walter Page’s bass. Another time, he raided Basie’s stash of chicken and devoured it. He later admitted he carefully re-wrapped the chicken bones and pretended he was asleep when the boss found them.

In the book The Big Band Years, Edison recalled, “Everyone in that band had a distinctive style. When you heard a Basie record, you knew who was taking a solo.”

The self-taught trumpeter, who began his professional career in Cleveland, fit in well, playing his horn in the now-classic spare Basie style. Many other trumpet players played louder and faster, but almost nobody played sweeter and with more lyricism.

Edison became famous for his economical, unhurried, swinging squeeze-note style. He once said, “I could never think fast anyway, so the notes just came few and far between.” Almost single-handedly with his trumpet he developed a vocabulary for the Harmon mute.

When Basie broke up his band in 1950 and became Benny Goodman’s pianist, Edison was shocked. After 13 years on the road with Basie, Edison suddenly found himself without a job and without a father figure. He worked for awhile with Buddy Rich’s band and backed singer Frank Sinatra on his television show and on many of Sinatra’s best records.

Looking back more than half a century later, Edison said, “Things have sure changed since the swing era when jazz was the popular music of the day, when melody was sovereign, when cutting contests separated the men from the boys, and when an entire 15-piece band recorded with one microphone.”

Edison died in July of 1999 at age 84.

Buster Harding

His name was not a household word. He was not one of the big stars of jazz history. But he was a musician who was highly respected by other musicians. He wrote and arranged for some of the most important jazz artists, helped define several important big bands, and contributed to the transition from swing to bebop. His name was Buster Harding.

Born in 1917, Harding was raised in Cleveland and basically taught himself to play the piano. He formed his first band while still a teenager attending Cleveland’s old Central High School on East 55th Street. In the early 1930s, he joined the seven-piece Cleveland band of Marion Sears before Earle Warren arrived from Springfield. Another member of that early Marion Sears band was Andy Anderson, who, for years, carried a frayed and faded photo of the band members.

Pointing to the old photo, Anderson said, “The first one was Horace Adams. We called him ‘Head.’ Then, there was Smitty, a guitar player. And Bus Harding was the piano player and arranger. James Peck, the drummer. He was out of Pittsburgh. And Francis Williams the trumpet player. You know, Greg Morris’ father. And myself on bass.”

Williams later played with Duke Ellington. His son became an actor and starred on the Mission Impossible television program.

Anderson said the band played at Oster’s Ballroom twice a week, at the Dreamland Ballroom across the street from the Cleveland Clinic, and at Cedar Gardens at East 97th and Cedar.

Harding left Cleveland in 1937 and got band jobs in Buffalo, Canada and Boston before going to New York in 1938. The 22-year-old Harding became an arranger and second pianist for Teddy Wilson’s short-lived big band, a band that included such sidemen as Ben Webster, Doc Cheatham, J.C. Heard and Shorty Baker.

When Wilson’s band folded, Harding began writing arrangements for other bands. He penned “Scarecrow” for Benny Goodman and “Stampede in G Minor” for Basie. The song was arranged by Warren, a later alumnus of Cleveland’s Marion Sears Orchestra. Warren wrote several other songs for the Basie band, which were arranged by Harding, including “Rockin’ the Blues” and “9:20 Special” which featured a solo by Coleman Hawkins.

Harding’s arrangements for the Basie Orchestra in the early 1940s helped set the style for that historic band.

Harding also arranged for Cab Calloway’s band. Calloway was more of a showman than a musician and was known primarily for his “Hi-De-Ho” singing and dancing. He admitted “There was something missing” in his band for a long time until he hired Harding as his musical director. Calloway said Harding “is turning out stuff that is inspirational. Now, for the first time in my life, I’ve got a band I can be really proud of.”

That Calloway band, directed by Harding, included saxophonists Chu Berry, Ben Webster, and Hilton Jefferson; trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Jonah Jones; bassist Milt Hinton; and drummer Cozy Cole.

When Harding left the Calloway band, he began freelancing big band arrangements for Basie, Artie Shaw and Roy Eldridge.

After World War II, Harding did more arrangements for the Basie Orchestra. Included was “Mr. Roberts’ Roost,” which was later renamed and became a juke box hit as “Paradise Squat.” It featured Basie playing organ.

In the late 1940s, Harding also worked as a pianist on New York’s famed 52nd Street. He played piano with singer Billie Holiday at the Ebony Club. The club was run by John Levy who helped Holiday during her drug problems. In her autobiography, Lady Sings the Blues,
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she recalled the place was packed every night. Harding also served as musical director for Holiday's recording sessions.

Like many other musicians and arrangers of the period, Harding managed to successfully make the transition from swing to bebop. Beginning in 1954, he arranged for the Dizzy Gillespie big band. Harding and Gillespie had worked together a decade earlier with the Calloway band. Harding wrote and arranged a number of originals for Gillespie's 1950s big band.

When he was in his 40s, Harding's health began to fail and he curtailed most of his performing.

The Cleveland musician, who contributed so much to the Basie band and others, died November 14, 1965 at the age of 48.

Skippy Williams

His name was Elbert Williams, but everybody called him "Skippy." He went from Cleveland's old Central High School to the Count Basie Orchestra.

Williams joined the Basie band in 1939, replacing Hershel Evans in the reed section, the reed section that included Lester Young and Earle Warren.

Williams was born July 27, 1916 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Because of Ku Klux Klan activity, his family decided to leave the South. While his mother and sisters moved north, Skippy and his brother, Pinky, worked their way from city to city with their father, an itinerant tailor. The family finally got back together in Cleveland, but shortly after they arrived here, both parents died and the children went to live with relatives at East 83rd and Quincy.

As a teenager, Williams listened to records by such groups as McKinney's Cotton Pickers, a rousing big band led by Don Redman. He taught himself to play the saxophone and later studied sax under Dr. Reddig, who was developing a reputation for school jazz at Central High School. Williams formed his own band to play for local dances. Among the members of that band was a young trumpet player named Freddie Webster.

In 1933, Williams joined the Chester Clark band where he played with Harry Edison and Red Callender.

The following year, 1934, Williams went out on the road with Toledo's Frank Terry Orchestra, a band that had included Cleveland trumpeter Emmett Berry.

By 1936, Skippy Williams found himself in Chicago playing with Eddie Cole, the bassist brother of Nat Cole, and working as a copyist for Fletcher Henderson's orchestra.

It was 1939 when Williams replaced Evans in the Basie Orchestra. On the bandstand, he usually sat next to Warren.

After touring with Basie, Williams left the band in New York and joined the Claude Hopkins Orchestra at the Zanzibar nightclub on Broadway. He also played with Edgar Hayes, Earl Bostic, former Basie arranger Jimmy Mundy, Duke Ellington, Bob Chester, and Tommy Reynolds, and led his own band for a year.

In the 1940s, Williams appeared in several films including movies produced by black film pioneer Oscar Micheaux.

In late 1940s, Williams settled in Florida and led his own small combo. He often told friends that a highlight of his career occurred when his group became the first black group to play on Miami Beach.

Ironically, in the 1950s, the saxophonist who had toured with the Basie swing machine and other top big jazz bands, found himself playing on some of the early rock 'n roll records of Bill Haley.

In the late 1950s, Williams moved to New York and continued playing. He soloed with the Ellington band during its last Carnegie Hall concert in 1973, not long before Ellington's death.

In 1985, Williams made an extended tour of Europe with other veterans of the Basie band. They spent two months playing in England, France, Germany and Italy.

Skippy Williams died February 28, 1994, at the age of 76, in New York.

His brother, Pinky, older by two years, who played baritone sax with a number of bands, continued to live in East Cleveland. Skippy Williams' son, Jimmy, became a drummer in New York.

Emmett Berry with Basie

Cleveland native Emmett Berry was a key member of the Basic trumpet section from 1945 to 1950 and recorded with Basie's small groups after he gave up his big band.

Berry started playing with local groups in Cleveland in the early 1930s. After joining the Frank Terry band in 1932, Berry replaced Roy Eldridge in the soloist's chair of the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. He remained with Henderson until 1939 when Henderson broke up his band to join Benny Goodman.

Berry played with Teddy Wilson's Cafe Society Sextet, Raymond Scott's group, and joined the Lionel Hampton Orchestra in 1943. The following year he was a member of Eddie Heywood's band and recorded a classic trumpet solo on Heywood's "Begin the Beguine."
Unlike many of his contemporaries, Berry was not swayed by the advent of bop. He continued for years to play the straight-ahead style he had learned with Fletcher Henderson.

If you looked very closely at Art Kane’s historic 1958 photograph of 57 jazz musicians, “A Great Day in Harlem,” you will notice Cleveland native Berry standing in the front row next to Thelonious Monk.

In the 1960s, Berry performed with dixieland groups in New York. In 1970, because of ill health, he came home to Cleveland to retire.

**Weasel Parker**

William Parker, known to jazz musicians and fans as “Weasel,” came to Cleveland in the 1950s after playing saxophone with the Basie band.

Like his good friend trumpeter Clark Terry, Parker grew up in the St. Louis area. Together they played in the George Hudson territory band for a year and a half before going to California to join Charlie Barnet’s orchestra. Parker recorded with Cootie Williams and replaced Buddy Tate in the Basie band in the late ‘40s. Weasel is best remembered for his solo on “Normania” (later called “Blee-Blop Blues”) with Basie.

He played for years in Cleveland at such clubs as the Jamaica Breeze on St. Clair Avenue where he frequently shared the bandstand with a highly-respected trumpeter named Ismail Ali, better known as “Hickey.” Parker also owned a music store, Costello’s Music, on East 105th Street and later worked at Prospect Music.

Weasel Parker died in Cleveland March 21, 1992 at the age of 70.

**Ace Carter**

When Count Basie died, his chair in the band was filled by a longtime Cleveland jazz pianist, Carl “Ace” Carter.

Born in Youngstown, Carter came to Cleveland in 1954 with the Joe Cooper band. Another member of that band was a trombonist named Mel Wanzo. Three decades later it was Wanzo, then playing on the Basie band, who recommended that Carter take over the important piano chair in the Basie band.

During a 30-year period, Carter had become a leader on the Cleveland jazz scene. He played regularly at the Boarding House Restaurant on Euclid Avenue and many other jazz spots in Cleveland. He performed with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Stitt and recorded with George Benson and Jimmy Scott.

Despite his vast experience playing with some of the best small jazz groups in Cleveland for more than 30 years, it was not an easy assignment taking over the role of the legendary Count Basie in the band. He said in a 1990 interview with the Cleveland Plain Dealer, “He’s sitting right there next to me, right there beside me.” Carter never tried to imitate Basie’s piano style. He said, “I’m pretty much on my own as far as soloing goes.”

Carter toured with the Frank Foster-led Basie band throughout the United States and to several foreign countries. He remembered one of the high spots was a week in London with Ella Fitzgerald.

But, eventually, the rigors of almost constant travel with the Basie band began to wear on Carter. Even though many of the trips were by plane, Ace said, “Getting up and making those flights was not easy. And you don’t always get enough sleep or eat the right kind of food.”

Carter left the band in 1991 and returned to Cleveland where he continued performing while battling a series of medical problems.

Ace died of kidney failure September 20, 1996 at the age of 65. Jazz musicians from across the country, including many members of the Basie band, attended his funeral service at St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church on East Boulevard in Cleveland.

Over the years a number of other Greater Cleveland area musicians played with the Basie band. They included Eddie Preston, Joe Alexander, Paul Weedon and Dennis Reynolds.