His virtuoso solo on the 1942 Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra recording of “Yesterdays” is enough to establish native Clevelander Freddie Webster as one of the outstanding trumpeters in jazz history. More than 50 years later, Dizzy Gillespie said Webster “probably had the best sound of the trumpet since the trumpet was invented, a sound that was alive, just alive and full of life!”

Others also lavishly praised the trumpet work of Webster. Critic Leonard Feather called the Clevelander “one of the most soulful performers among modern jazz trumpeters.”

Miles Davis said Webster was the trumpeter he tried to imitate when he was growing up. Benny Bailey, who also grew up in Cleveland playing trumpet a few years later, said it was difficult to tell from Webster’s records “just how beautiful his sound was.” According to Bailey, “Webster had the most wonderful sound of any trumpet player I’ve ever heard. It was sheer beauty which no one can ever know unless they heard him play in person.” During an interview at the 1992 Tri-C JazzFest, Bailey told me, “Freddie always had a big vibrato. But the attack and the way Freddie played chords! Nobody else played like him. He played in a different way from everybody. He didn’t play like Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie or anybody else. He had his own style.”

Unfortunately, Webster died at the age of 30 in 1947 and did not leave a generous collection of recordings. But there were some 78s, most of which were never re-released on LP or compact disc.

Early years in Cleveland

The future trumpet virtuoso grew up in the mid-1930s in a very religious home on East 72nd Street near Cedar Avenue. Drummer Lawrence “Jacktown” Jackson recalled when he first came to Cleveland with the Pete Diggs Orchestra, he lived for a period at Webster’s home. “His mother and the whole family were very religious,” said Jacktown. “Every morning, she’d have the three fellows who lived with them singing church songs before breakfast.”

Webster played in the Central High School band. Veteran Cleveland pianist Chick Chaikin recalled Webster blowing riffs with the marching band. While still in high school, he quickly made a name for himself playing with local jazz groups.

Trombonist Bernard Simms remembered, “I was walking down Cedar Avenue with Freddie, going to rehearsal, and Freddie said all he wanted to do was play trumpet so loud and have a tone so big that the whole world could hear him.”

After high school, Webster formed his own 14-piece band which toured Northern Ohio in 1938 and 1939. Chaikin remembered that band and said, “Webster was a little guy who could play fast and had a beautiful tone.” Webster persuaded his Central High School friend Tadd Dameron to play piano in the band. Dameron later said Webster was the person responsible for starting him on a career in jazz.

Webster also played with the popular Marion Sears Orchestra at Cedar Gardens, the popular nightclub at East 97th and Cedar. At Cedar Gardens, saxophonist Andy Anderson remembered Webster’s tone “was big as a house!” Anderson said, “He also had the touch and feeling for the music.”

On the road

When he was only 21 years old (in 1938) Webster left Cleveland and took his big, full tone and feeling for the music on the road with a series of important bands. His first job outside of Cleveland was with Earl “Fatha” Hines’ swinging big band. Another trumpeter from Cleveland, Harry “Pee Wee” Jackson, was with the Hines band and persuaded Earl to hire Webster. Bailey said, “Pee Wee and Freddie were like that. One wouldn’t accept a job unless they hired the other one. One would quit if they didn’t hire the other one.”

In 1941, Webster went to New York where he met Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Bud Powell, trumpeter Benny Harris and others. They frequently got together in Dizzy’s apartment on 7th Avenue or at the Dewey Square Hotel in Harlem and spent hours talking and playing. Historian Feather later pointed to these sessions as the first tentative steps toward a new form of jazz called bebop.

Later in 1941, Webster rejoined the Earl Hines band which, at the time, included Charlie Parker (who was
playing tenor, not alto), Gillespie, Ray Nance, Billy Eckstine and Sarah Vaughan. This was the legendary Hines band that was called “The Incubator of Bop.” Unfortunately, because of a long strike by the musicians’ union against the recording companies, this orchestra, with so much rich young talent, never recorded.

**Jamming at Minton’s**

After playing gigs with the Hines Orchestra, sidemen Gillespie, Parker, Webster and others often slipped off to a club in Harlem called Minton’s Playhouse where they jammed for hours.

Gillespie later recalled, “There were always some cats showing up there who couldn’t blow at all.” One was a tenor player they called “Demon” who tried to dominate the jam sessions. Dizzy called him “The first freedom player—free of harmony, free of rhythm, free of everything!” One night, when Demon was playing chorus after chorus, Teddy Hill, the manager of Minton’s, stood in front of the bandstand with his arms folded and yelled, “Demon, get off my bandstand!”

Gillespie said, “We began to work out some complex variations on chords and we used them to scare away those no-talent guys.”

As they explored those variations that they had experimented with at Gillespie’s apartment, they began to shape what was to become bebop. Of course, it wasn’t as simple as Gillespie described it, but Miles Davis, in his autobiography, said, “We was all trying to get our masters degrees and PhDs from Minton’s University of Bebop under the tutelage of Professors Bird and Diz.”

With Parker, Gillespie, pianist Thelonious Monk, drummer Kenny Clarke and guitarist Charlie Christian, Cleveland’s Freddie Webster was one of the early pioneers of the new form. Christian, who was playing with the Benny Goodman Orchestra at the time, lugged his guitar amplifier uptown to Harlem for the jam sessions. Sometimes he left it with Manager Hill.

Hill had become manager of Minton’s after playing with Louis Armstrong and leading his own swing band in the 1930s. Gillespie made his first records with Hill’s band in 1937 when Dizzy was 20 years old.

Hill continued to manage Minton’s until 1969. In 1976, he moved quietly to Cleveland to live with his daughter, Gwendolyn Hill Basket, in Warrensville Heights. Doctors discovered he was suffering from colon cancer. Seven months later (May 19, 1977), Hill, who had played an important role in jazz history, died in Cleveland. He was buried at Highland Park Cemetery on Chagrin Boulevard.

When family members went to New York to collect his possessions, they discovered his apartment had been broken into and ransacked. Among the missing items was Charlie Christian’s historic guitar amplifier.

**Recording in New York**

In 1941, Webster began recording with a variety of bands and jazz groups. He played with Louis Jordan’s legendary Tympani Five on such 1941 recordings as “St. Vitus Dance,” “Brotherly Love,” “Boogie Woogie Came to Town,” and “Saxa-Woogie.”

In 1942, Webster was playing with the band of Sonny Boy Williams. They recorded a number of sides including Webster’s composition “Reverse the Charges.”

**Touring with Jimmie Lunceford**

In April of 1942, Webster rejoined his old Cleveland friend, Pee Wee Jackson, in the nationally popular Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, a band that had begun playing professionally in Cleveland nine years earlier. After hearing Webster’s trumpet for the first time, critic George Simon wrote in *Metronome* magazine, “There is a brilliant young trumpeter named Freddie Webster playing with the Lunceford Orchestra.”

While traveling with the Lunceford band, Webster met a young aspiring trumpeter named Miles Davis in St. Louis. They became close friends and Davis later said, “My real main man during those first days was Freddie Webster. He had a big, singing sound, a big warm, mellow sound. I used to try to play like him.”

Benny Bailey said Webster “practically taught Davis. I know that because Miles told me,” said Bailey. “They were living together in New York and were very close. In fact, there’s a solo on a very early Charlie Parker record. Miles played Freddie Webster’s solo, note for note.”

It was during this period with Lunceford that Webster recorded live his monumental version of “Yesterdays.”

When the Lunceford band, with Webster and Jackson in the trumpet section, came to Cleveland to play for a dance at Ferguson’s Ballroom, a group of young
musicians from Central High School went to hear them. Drummer Chink McKinney remembered, “All the kids from school were there, down in front, listening. And every time Webster and Pee Wee Jackson stood up, we cheered our old Cleveland heroes. They did the most beautiful job I ever heard in my life. Boy, they played the job of their lives!” Four years later, Webster would be playing in a band with some of those young admirers.

Bailey, who was eight years younger than Webster, remembered one time when Freddie came home to Cleveland. “He gathered me and a couple other trumpet players over at Richard “Big Foot” Kennedy’s house,” said Bailey. “We couldn’t play in the house because we didn’t want to disturb the neighbors. So we went into the bathroom. It was probably louder in the bathroom. Freddie took his horn out and just played – with no piano, nothing. He just played melodies. Man, it was really something! I felt I was transported to another world. It was beautiful!”

With Lucky Millinder

Webster spent three years with the Lucky Millinder Orchestra. Another member of that band was former Central High School student Bull Moose Jackson who later became a leading rhythm-and-blues artist.

While he was traveling with Millinder and playing at the Savoy Ballroom in New York, Webster attracted the attention of critic Barry Ulanov. The Millinder band was playing a battle of the bands with the Jay McShann band which then featured Charlie Parker. In a February 1942 review, Ulanov devoted more than half of his column to Webster. He said, “Webster is a real find. He plays with a wonderful sense of structure, giving all his choruses and half-choruses a discernible beginning, middle and ending. His favorite range is a low register, projected with boldness and deepness. He doesn’t restrict himself to low notes but makes long scoops from the middle and high registers to the bottom and then sails back up. He plays with an easy technique in perfect taste.”

*DownBeat* magazine said Webster “has a colossal tone – big, broad and sure – and is a standout in the band.” One of Webster’s solos with Millinder was on Bill Doggett’s composition “Savoy.”

After leaving Millinder, Webster took his big trumpet sound to the band of Benny Carter who had studied at Ohio’s Wilberforce University. Singing with the Carter band at the time was Billie Holiday. One night during a radio broadcast, Freddie soloed on “Star Dust” and felt he screwed it up. Other band members were stunned when Webster suddenly pulled out a gun and pointed it to his head.

Webster also took part in the first recording of the Billy Eckstine All-Star Band for the DeLuxe record label. In 1944, the much-traveled Webster was playing with the Sabby Lewis Orchestra. With Lewis he recorded Tadd Dameron’s arrangement of “Embraceable You.”

In July of 1945, Webster recorded his composition, “Reverse the Charges,” and “The Man I Love” with a quintet led by tenor saxist Frankie Socolow.

When Dizzy Gillespie formed his big band in 1946, he chose Webster to play in the trumpet section which also included Miles Davis, Fats Navarro and Kenny Dorham. Years later, Gillespie remembered Webster’s playing at New York’s McKinley Theatre. “Oh, man! We played this arrangement I made on ‘I Should Care.’ I had the solo and I gave the solo to Freddie. (After he played the solo) I never played that solo no more. The arrangement was out of the band after he left!”

Return to Cleveland

Later in 1946, the 29-year-old Webster came home to Cleveland and played with a Cleveland band led by Johnnie Powell. The band included a number of younger musicians who had also graduated from Central High School. Among them were 19-year-old saxophonist and arranger Willie Smith and 22-year-old trombonist William “Shep” Shepherd. The band made one record for Paramount Records of Cleveland, “Perdido,” featuring a trumpet solo by Webster, and “Cedar Avenue Blues” with a vocal by Gene Jordan. Smith composed “Cedar Avenue Blues” and arranged both sides.

Also playing in the trumpet section of the Powell Orchestra was Earl Douthitt, Sr. Douthitt remembered Webster playing a gig with the Powell band at the Moonglow Ballroom in Buffalo. “All the lights went out before the dance started,” said Douthitt, “and Freddie took his horn out of the case, put a mute in, and played in the dark. That was the most beautiful trumpet playing I ever heard in my life – in the dark!”

While playing with the Powell band in Cleveland, Webster continued to play some gigs around the country, including a short stint with Norman Granz’ touring show, *Jazz at the Philharmonic*.

In July of 1946, Webster teamed up again with his old high school friend Tadd Dameron and 22-year-old singer Sarah Vaughan. Webster’s brief introduction to her vocal on Dameron’s best known composition, the
popular “If You Could See Me Now,” was probably Webster’s most widely-heard trumpet playing.

In 1947, Webster was asked to join the swinging Count Basie Orchestra. According to Leon Washington, when Basie asked him what his price was, Webster said, “After you’ve paid the rest of those guys, you and I split 50-50!” Webster never joined the Basie band.

In April of 1947, Webster went to Chicago to play a gig with saxophonist Sonny Stitt. Before he left, Willie Smith, who as a hobby, hand painted neckties, gave one to Webster. It depicted a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, which Webster smoked, and smoke swirling around a trumpet. Smith said Webster took the hand painted tie with him to Chicago. Smith never saw that tie again.

Webster died at the age of 30 in Stitt’s room at the Strode Hotel in Chicago. Officials said he died of a heart attack, but Miles Davis wrote in his autobiography that Webster died of an overdose of heroin that was intended for Stitt. According to Davis, Stitt had been “beating everybody out of money to support his habit and somebody arranged to give him some bad heroin.” Davis wrote, “Sonny gave it to Freddie who shot it and died.”

It was the end of the Cleveland native’s brief and spectacular career.

Almost forgotten
Dameron later said, “Webster could have been one of the greatest men in jazz.”

Trumpeter Art Farmer, years later, remembered, “Webster was the main player for tone, the man for sound.”

Lionel Hampton told me, “Webster was one of the best to come out of Cleveland.”

Bailey called Webster “the patron saint of Cleveland trumpeters.” He said Webster set the standard for what some have called “The Cleveland style of trumpet.” Bailey said, “I don’t know what it is, but they had something similar there, a brilliant tone and brassy sound.”

Bailey was one of those Cleveland trumpeters influenced by Webster. Decades later, Benny listened to that 1942 recording of Webster playing “Yesterdays” with me and exclaimed, “That was something! That distinctive vibrato! Those glitches! You have to have perfect control. This was his strong point. I still do a lot of those things without thinking about it—subconsciously.”

Trumpeter Freddie Hubbard told me he remembered Webster for “his singing sound.” Hubbard said, “You could hear him way in the back of the room without a mike. He wasn’t real loud but he carried the sound.”

There is little doubt that Webster was one of the most influential performers in jazz in the 1940s and one of the most important jazz artists ever from Cleveland, but, because of his early death and relatively few solo recordings, he is hardly known, even by many ardent jazz fans.

Thanks to those rare old 78 records, collectors can still appreciate Freddie Webster’s artistry. Unfortunately, most of those old 78s were never re-issued on LPs or compact discs.

His 1942 five and a half minute masterpiece performance of “Yesterdays” with the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra was released on a long playing record by First Time Records (FTR-1506) as a “Limited Edition for Collectors Only.”