

JAZZ FROM MUSKOGEE, OKLAHOMA:  
EASTERN OKLAHOMA AS A HEARTH  
OF MUSICAL CULTURE

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1987

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1992

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
May, 2000

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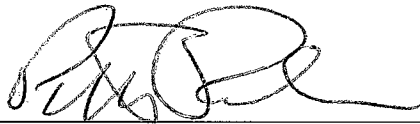
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my major adviser, Dr. Peter C. Rollins, who not only acted as a mentor during my graduate school career, but strongly encouraged my interest in pursuing the topic of this dissertation. I would also like to thank Dr. George Carney, whose pioneering work in the field of Oklahoma music scholarship has informed my work from the outset, and whose expertise in this area has enriched my telling of this story. My gratitude extends to my other committee members, Dr. Edward Jones, for his support of this project since its inception and his voluntary involvement in its editing and completion, and Dr. Gene Halleck for her thoughtful feedback and encouragement.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation for the help I received from Rodger Harris, oral historian of the Oklahoma Historical Society. The Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma Library also provided me with important research assistance for which I am grateful.

I am not able to express the immensity of my gratitude and love for my wife, Geri, and my son Nokose, for supporting me in all ways during this project, and my mother, Nola Fenton Downs, whose constant support throughout my life of unorthodox career moves provided me with the confidence to set any goal I thought significant. I also wish to acknowledge my father, Hugh W. Tudor-Foley, in whose garage I found Stanley Dance's The World of Swing, wherein I first discovered that several jazz musicians were born in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

Finally, I would like to thank the almighty creator for the opportunity to fulfill my dreams.

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Recorded by Hugh Foley  
February 27, 2000  
Okfuskee County, Oklahoma
  
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Tulsa, Oklahoma
  
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October 10, 1994  
Kansas City, Missouri
  
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Kansas City, Missouri  
(Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society)

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## INTRODUCTION

I'm thinking about my hometown, a little place way out in the West.

I'm thinking about my hometown, a little place way out in the West

Some folks call it a hick town, but I rate it with the best.

I left home for the big town, it ain't been so long ago.

I left home for the big town, it ain't been so long ago.

But there's nothing in a big town that my small town friends don't know.

(Jay McShann "Hometown Blues")

When asked why Muskogee, Oklahoma produced so many top-flight jazz musicians Jay McShann joked with a classroom full of people before his 1993 concert at Oklahoma State University, "It must have been something in the water."<sup>1</sup> In a January, 2000 issue of Living Blues, a whole issue dedicated to McShann and fellow Muskogean Claude Williams as primary living proponents of Kansas City jazz, McShann reports the question has not gone away: "Everybody often wondered how it happened that so many musicians come out of Muskogee. Nobody know[s] why . . ." (Brisbin "Jay" 17). This study explains why internationally recognized jazz musicians Aaron Bell, Don Byas, Barney Kessel, Clarence Love, Jay McShann, Joe Thomas, Walter Thomas, and Claude Williams were all born in Muskogee, Oklahoma and what made Muskogee a town in which jazz could flourish.

Wry and witty bandleader Clarence Love, born in Muskogee in 1908, wrote in a 1997 letter to the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame, "The question [is] always asked why so many Black and White musicians come from Muskogee? Why: No liquor in Oklahoma was the number one cause. Kansas City in Missouri was wet and Pendergrass [sic] liked music and fun."<sup>2</sup> According to Love's theory, all the musicians left because of the liquor laws, but that does not explain why the musicians were there in the first place. In total, more known reasons exist for their departure than their origins.

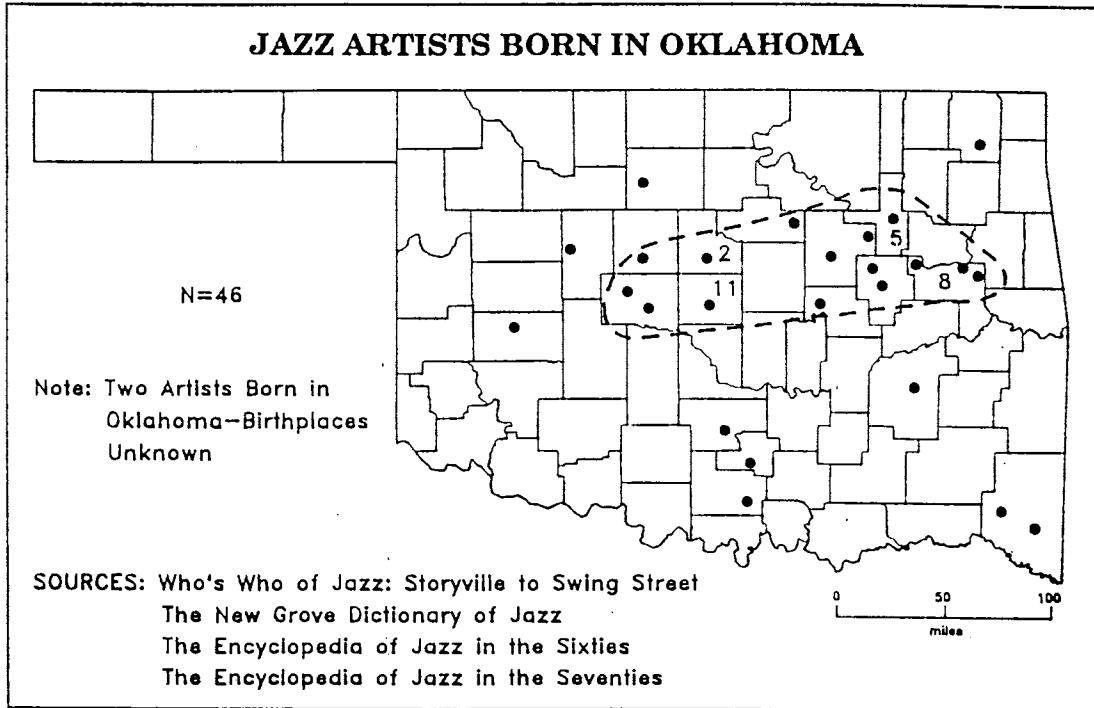


Fig. 1. Jazz Artists Born in Oklahoma, map courtesy of George O. Carney, "Oklahoma Jazz: Deep Second to 52nd Street." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 72 (1994): 4-21.

Music geographer George Carney gives several reasons why the musicians left: "Because of its rural orientation, sparse population, and lack of a metropolitan center, Oklahoma failed to retain most of its jazz musicians. The allure of recording studios, more and better performing outlets, and larger markets affected the decisions of Oklahomans to migrate from the state to seek fame and fortune" ("Oklahoma Jazz" 14). The question remains, however, as to what combination of factors led Muskogee to produce a disproportionate amount of top-notch jazz artists compared to larger Oklahoma cities such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City (Carney Oklahoma Jazz 5). The answers to the questions are not only important for Oklahomans who are interested in the cultural history of the state, but also to those interested in a social, economic, and artistic apex of independence and cultural flowering of African-American society in the late 19th and early 20th century in Indian Territory and the eventual state of Oklahoma.

A number of scholars have intimated this kind of study could be very significant. In his review essay "The Jazz Studies Renaissance," Burton W. Peretti writes about the need for deeper research into regional studies of jazz:

...regions lacking jazz archives have long been in danger of losing their collective memories. Fuller documentation of more regions could have a great impact on jazz historiography, perhaps revising the hoary myth of jazz's birth in New Orleans and its eventual exodus up the Mississippi River, among other assumptions that have oversimplified the actual historical process. (143)

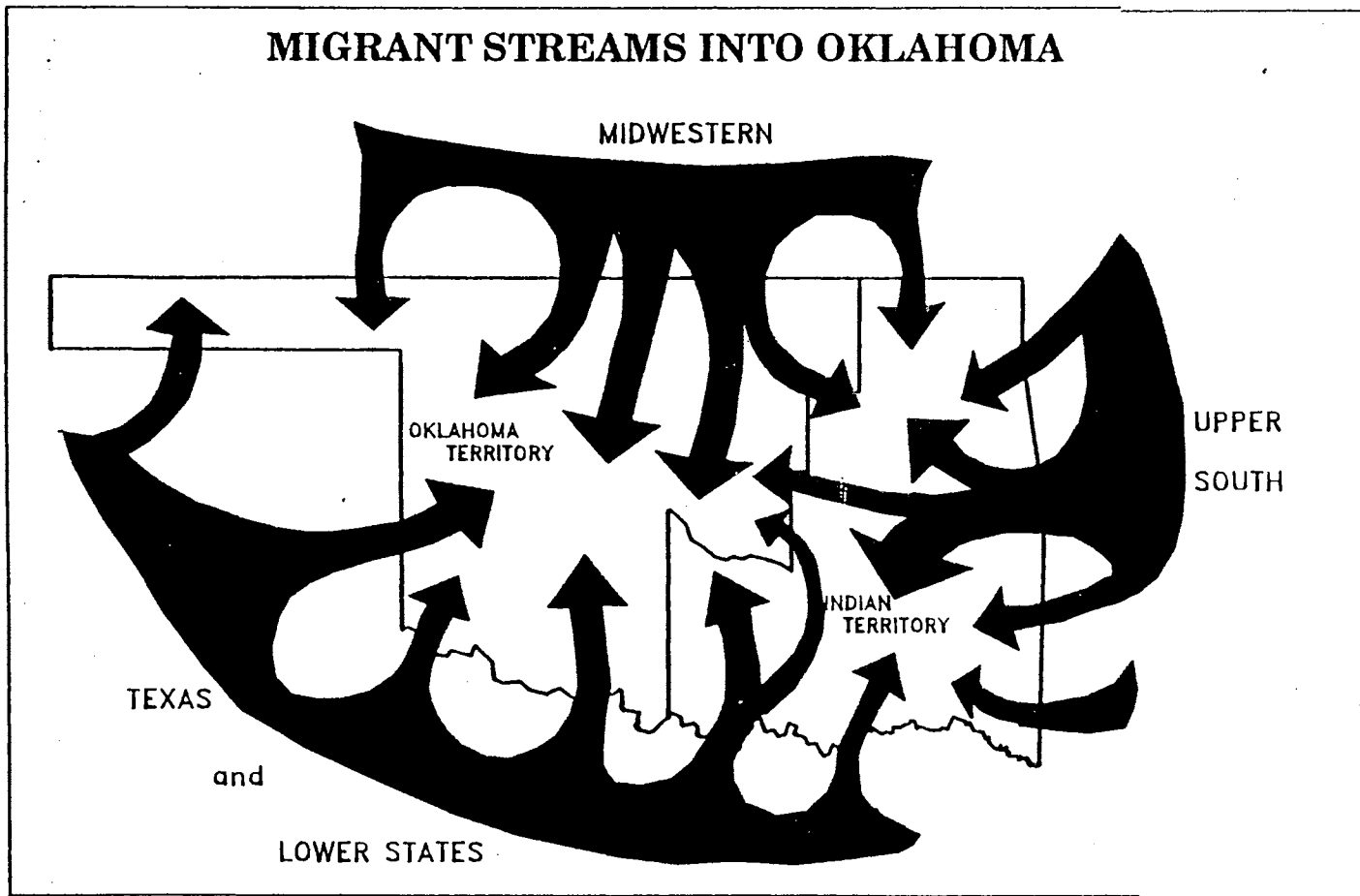
Conductor, composer, and jazz critic Gunther Schuller also comments on the need for more research into the whole picture of musical traditions in the Southwestern United States. When more is written, Schuller says,

It will be a fascinating study of the cross-cultural influences between and among a vast panorama of musics, comprising the troubadour-like tradition of itinerant blues singers and guitarists, the innumerable small Texas blues bands of the 1930s, the whole rich complex of earthy dance musics ranging from the Anglo-American

country dances (jigs, reels, schottisches) and crude stompy polkas of the Czechs, Poles, and Germans in the region, to the Mexican and French Acadian dance idioms, the cowboy songs of the frontier, the rural banjo picking tradition--all this intertwined with a ubiquitous fiddle tradition, both white and black. ("Great" 564)

Although Schuller points out the Southwest is a crossroads for a multitude of traditions, he does not mention Oklahoma specifically, nor does he mention any American Indian music. Early 20th century Oklahoma travel writer Charles Gould does point to the state's multi-cultural traditions by saying "Oklahoma is a meeting place of many different peoples. Nowhere else is there such a mingling of types. Practically every state in the Union and every civilized nation on the globe is represented among the state's inhabitants" (157). Carney explains how the state's geographic status influenced its music: "...the state was centrally located on the expanding culture map of the country and it functioned as a major music crossroads" (17). As a result of both its geographic position and its multi-cultural foundation, Carney explains that jazz was able to develop in the state as a whole. Schuller notes that this wide variety of traditions mixed with the diverse ethnic and cultural makeup of the region was brought into greater cultural flux by radio, recordings, jukeboxes, migration patterns and, of course, the oil boom ("Great" 564). Malone agrees with Schuller, yet states geographic implications that Schuller does not raise: the Southwest's proximity to New Orleans, which, when considered with all the other factors, "produce[d] a grass roots music of a hybrid nature" (81).

When one examines these factors, some clues emerge as to why the Muskogee musicians were so versatile -- they all came from a region bubbling with a multitude of influences, which may account for the one hallmark that seems present in all of Muskogee's jazz musicians: the four most prominent musicians were very adaptable to the changing genres of jazz, from the blues-based dance music of the territory bands of the 1920s, to the sweet swing of the 1930s, the bebop of the 1940s, and cool jazz of the



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Fig. 2. Migrant Streams into Oklahoma, map courtesy of George O. Carney, "Oklahoma Jazz: Deep Second to 52nd Street." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 72 (1994): 4-21.

1950s. The Muskogee musicians were able to "cross over" from one style to another depending on the changing tastes and styles, which shows their easy adaptation to the creative and improvisatory nature of jazz's hybrid evolution. As a result of Muskogee's multi-cultural and mixed-blood atmosphere, musicians needed to be versatile in order to cater to several tastes, which, in turn, made the musicians more flexible. Therefore, although smaller in scope and in population, Muskogee's environment in the late 1800s and early 1900s is not totally unlike New Orleans when that port city began forming out of several racial influences, giving it a unique cultural blend (Lichtenstein and Dankner 15).

The area surrounding Three Forks is certainly multi-cultural in its modern origins, with European establishment by the French connecting the area to New Orleans as early as 1800. Following Fort Gibson's development by the United States as the Ellis Island of the West for American Indians who brought their African slaves to the area, the subsequent oncoming of carpetbaggers and settlers of every European persuasion who sought cheap land and new opportunities for themselves and their families broadened the ethnic makeup of the area. The additional influx of African-Americans who left the oppressive conditions of the post-Civil War South for the promise of independence in Indian Territory's all-Black towns, and the establishment of Muskogee as a railroad, transportation and shipping center for both Indian Territory and the Southwest, contributed significantly to the diverse makeup of the area. Interestingly, however, no one has thoroughly researched these multi-cultural roots of Muskogee and their cultural impact.

Again and again, Muskogee is listed as the birthplace of eight internationally recognized musicians in the most highly regarded jazz reference and biographical materials. At least four of the artists, Don Byas, Barney Kessel, Jay McShann, and Claude "Fiddler" Williams are recognized as titans on their instruments. Aaron Bell, Clarence Love, and Joe and Walter Thomas, also had noteworthy careers that intersected with some of the huge figures in jazz history, such as Jelly Roll Morton, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. Nowhere, however, does anyone describe what there was in Muskogee that

produced these musicians, along with others who moved to town such as Terrence Holder, Pee Wee Russell, and others, not to mention Lee Wiley from nearby Fort Gibson, nor Oscar Pettiford from Okmulgee. Critics like Russell (Jazz 187), Dance (World of Count 249), and others seem content to say these musicians came from Muskogee and that is it.

William Savage, author of the only complete book on Oklahoma's music history, Singing Cowboys and All That Jazz, says Muskogee's Jay McShann, Aaron Bell, Claude "Fiddler" Williams, and Barney Kessel are names "sufficiently prominent to secure that community's place in the history of American jazz" (95). Although Savage does bring up Muskogee, he openly admits his book is "intended merely as an introduction" ("Oklahoma All-Stars" 104). Savage closes the book with the idea that a study based on the city's music history is necessary:

In discussing jazz music and its relationship to the cultural history of Oklahoma, it is a simple matter to belabor the point; this is the history that few people know, despite the abundance of its sources. There are books yet to be written on the subject; Muskogee alone would make for a fascinating investigation. ("Oklahoma All-Stars" 104)

Ellis Ezell, born in Tahlequah to a Cherokee freedwoman, and in whose band a young Barney Kessel played in Muskogee, said in a 1994 interview, "I think the schools and the band directors had a lot to do with it" (Appendix D). Ellis Ezell is partly correct, as the musical education available in the Muskogee Public Schools, for both African-American and Anglo-Americans, was solid throughout the 20th century. The segregated African-American high school, Manual Training, was particularly fruitful; however, it was not the only way to gain musical training in Muskogee. A musician could learn on the job in bands put together by families or friends, or by picking up with one of the several traveling territory bands and variety shows that came through Muskogee as a result of the town's status as a nexus for trains going north and south from Kansas City to Dallas.

Jay McShann is also partly correct when he refers to the water in the area. The reason why the settlement of Muskogee exists in the first place is because the town is situated on the south side of the conjunction of three rivers, the Arkansas which connects the area to the Mississippi and New Orleans, the Verdigris, and the Grand (formerly known as the Neosho). The Three Forks area is an ancient tribal meeting place, connected by the rivers to the moundbuilding culture of 850 A.D, the major complex of which was located near present-day Spiro, Oklahoma approximately where the Arkansas River enters Arkansas from the west. By 1795, the area became a primary trading post, and, subsequently, the military post Fort Gibson in 1824, which laid the ground work for the forced emigration of the Muscogee (Creeks) and Cherokees to the area, who, along with their slaves, were removed to Three Forks in the 1820s and 1830s. Thus began the area's African-American history in the region, a history which saw African-Americans fight in Union uniforms at the Battle of Honey Springs, and watched African-Americans build towns for themselves since they had all the skills necessary to do the construction, as well as the resources resulting from their tribal allotments. During this era, Muskogee also witnessed the professional evolution of freed slaves into lawyers, college presidents, doctors, newspaper publishers, oil leasers, small business owners, church leaders, politicians, and laborers in almost every form of service industry a booming railroad town needed in the 1890s.

In addition, Muskogee's African-American leaders became the primary proponents of the all-Black town movement in eastern Oklahoma, a fact usually overlooked in the scholarship about the all-Black towns of the area.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly then, all the music that could be found on the plantations and rural churches of the South, flowed up and down the Mississippi River Valley's shipping network, and rattled through the day and night on the trains of the Southwest. The music also traveled with the wagons, then buses and cars on the Texas Road and then U.S. Highway 69, and, finally, found its way into Muskogee, a glowing musical furnace in which the forging of American jazz took place -- the result of multiple regional influences merging, such as the previously mentioned



Muscogee and African hymns and spirituals, blues, brass bands, fiddle tunes, reels, ragtime, and Tin Pan Alley standards, all of which contributed to the development of jazz. A music scene evolved where jazz originated simultaneously as it did in other river cities of the South, could be passed on to ready apprentices in need of work and practice, and provide a steady source of entertainment for not only the economically thriving African-American community of Muskogee and the surrounding all-Black towns and cities with substantial African-American populations, but also for the various Anglo-American organizations and clubs who welcomed the musical entertainment.

In the final analysis, the relatively small town of Muskogee, Oklahoma produced eight internationally recognized jazz musicians because of the African-American community's strength as a social, economic, moral, and artistic force; in addition, a strong music scene existed because of the booming mercantile town's geographic location between Kansas City and Dallas, making it a primary stopping point for spending the night, performing, picking up some new musicians if necessary, or even forming a new group altogether.

By exploring the cultural and musical history of the city, however, an additional revelation becomes apparent: Muskogee, Oklahoma has not only missed out on the inclusion of its jazz scene as primary to understanding how the Southwest's jazz tradition evolved, but has also not been thoroughly included in the histories of Oklahoma's all-Black towns, when it was a primary hub for the all-Black town movement in eastern Oklahoma. Also, the activism by Muskogee's African-American leaders before, during, and after statehood established a bench mark of civil rights advocacy for African-Americans in the United States from the period between the end of the Civil War to the establishment of Oklahoma as a state in 1907. As a result, Muskogee should not only be recognized as a cultural hearth of jazz, the city should also be considered a pinnacle of African-American society in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. The result of this recognition will be important for students of Oklahoma's African-American civil rights history, which

will illustrate some of the overlooked foundations for the state's participation in the nationwide civil rights movement which began in the late 1940s.

The background and initial inspiration for this work is founded in the many discrepancies and questions existing in the various jazz reference materials regarding jazz from Muskogee, Oklahoma. The study is boosted by the field of music geography, which explores the connections between geographical factors and the cultural developments of the people in a particular place, such as the multi-cultural evolution of Muskogee at the confluence of three rivers. (A survey of the necessary materials to approach the area of music geography is included in the bibliographic essay at the end of the dissertation.) In addition, a scholarly need also exists in the areas of the popular social history of 19th century African-Americans in Indian Territory up until the Civil War, the subsequent fifty years of social and economic freedom for African-Americans up to Oklahoma statehood in 1907, and the resulting segregation and further insulation of the already independent and economically strong African-American community of Muskogee. All of these events, and the people who shaped them, helped foster this cultural explosion of jazz purveyors from Muskogee.

The objectives of this study are critical, social, and historical. Critically, in order to place them in an appropriate context, a complete review of 20th century jazz scholarship is necessary on the jazz musicians from Muskogee, Oklahoma. The social objective of the study is not only to represent the development of the area's African-American socio-cultural milieu, but to understand what traditional, religious, and popular music existed around Three Forks, Indian Territory, and later in Muskogee, Oklahoma, from settlement until statehood in 1907, and then up through World War II. Finally, unpublished oral histories from four of the musicians born in Muskogee and one musician who worked professionally in Muskogee offer eyewitness accounts and details of the social and musical history of African-Americans in Muskogee from the time of settlement until 1945. In

order to follow the narrative thread of this period, a summary of how events unfolded to create an environment in which jazz could flourish is necessary.

### **Summary of Three Forks and Muskogee History**

The history of European settlement at Three Forks, Indian Territory, begins in 1795 as a trading post for the purposes of sending goods to New Orleans via the Arkansas, which connects to the Mississippi River and, therefore, establishes an economic, and, therefore, cultural exchange between Three Forks and New Orleans, Louisiana as early as 1800. The next significant development in the area's history is the United States government's plan to remove the tribes located in the Southeastern United States to Indian Territory. Spurred on by Andrew Jackson's removal policies, the Southeastern tribes, beginning with the first Muscogee in 1828, arrived in Indian Territory. Of course, the Muscogee's arrival brought the tribes into direct contact and clashes with tribes already in the area, necessitating the bolstering of Fort Gibson at Three Forks. In addition, along with the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickisaw, Muscogee (Creek) and Seminole, came their slaves to new plantations and farms in the Three Forks area.

The slaves of these tribes fared well in varying degrees after the Civil War, depending on the tribe by which one was freed. Overall, the Muscogee slaves emerged in perhaps the best shape to begin the formidable communities now known as the all-Black towns of eastern Oklahoma. Not only did the Muscogee provide allotments for its freedmen, the Muscogee by and large had accepted intermarriage with the Africans since the earliest days of slavery; the relative acceptance of mixed marriages encouraged other African-Americans who had married American Indians to move the Creek Nation. One such town, Rentiesville, was founded near what would become the Honey Springs Battlefield, where African-Americans, Anglo-Americans, and American Indians fought together against the Confederate regiments made up of Texans and American Indians on July 17, 1863.

Bluesman D.C. Minner, born, raised and still living in Rentiesville, tells the story of how

his ancestors came to the Creek Nation: "[The family] came from Alabama in a covered wagon, four Cherokee sisters with four black husbands. . . Their families followed the Trail of Tears and they stopped in the Creek Country because the Creek Indians was the ones who accepted interracial marriages, mostly, but they wanted to be close to the Cherokees in Tahlequah" (Carney and Foley 41). After the Civil War, a number of "freed" slaves from both Indian Territory's tribes and the South, as well as runaway slaves from the South, made their way to the promising environments of Indian Territory to begin farming and to start businesses, schools, and churches. Urged on by freedmen entrepreneurs who had landed status in Indian Territory as a result of being included on tribal rolls as part of treaties, Oklahoma became the destination of choice for a number of former slaves, and, subsequently, several all-African-American towns were incorporated in Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory before statehood in 1907. Although this history is fairly well known now, and becoming more so, Muskogee has never received enough credit as a hub of the all-Black town movement in eastern Oklahoma.

Upon statehood in 1907, however, Oklahoma's legislature immediately implemented "separate facilities" laws, which caused a subsequent uproar among African-Americans, and many chose to leave the state for a slightly friendlier climate in Kansas and further north-- which could explain why three of the Muskogee-born jazz musicians considered in this study left at an early age. Those people of African descent who stayed had very strong social, economic, and spiritual ties to the areas formerly known as the Indian and Oklahoma Territories and continued in the capacities whereby they had employed themselves, albeit now in more segregated areas. Nevertheless, several strong African-American towns and segments of communities in Oklahoma formed a solid socio-cultural underpinning for their citizens, and none was stronger nor more prolific than Muskogee, Indian Territory. Built on a strong foundation built in the last half of the 19th century, African-American Muskogee maintained a formidable infrastructure of business enterprise, religious and educational institutions, and entertainment facilities. As a result, many of

Muskogee's citizens had the opportunity to witness or participate in American jazz history, and surprising as it may seem, until now Muskogee has never been given a thorough survey of its African-American musical history, a history which mirrors and in many ways fostered the development of jazz in the Southwestern United States.

### **Definition of Terms and Limitations of Study**

"Muscogee" is used in this study to describe the tribal people of Alabama and Georgia who were forcibly removed to Indian Territory as part of the United States government's 19th century policy toward American Indians. In most general scholarship, the Muscogee people are referred to as the "Creeks" because colonial explorers found the tribal towns of an organized confederacy living along the creeks and rivers in Alabama and Georgia. Outside of quoted material, the accepted anglicized spelling of the current Muscogee (Creek) Nation will be used in the study. However, "Creek" will commonly appear in quoted material and should be interpreted by the reader as referring to the Muscogee people, from whom the town name of Muskogee is derived.

Secondly, the term Three Forks applies to the geographical area where the Grand (formerly Neosho), Verdigris, and Arkansas Rivers meet in present day Oklahoma. The confluence of these rivers is of utmost significance since their location is the reason for settlement in the area at Fort Gibson, and the eventual emergence of Muskogee.

With regard to African-Americans, that term is used to delineate people of African descent who came to Indian Territory either as slaves or freedmen. However, some disagreement exists on whether or not to capitalize "black" in reference to African-Americans. Therefore, I have chosen the upper case "B" when the word "Black" is used regarding the all-Black town movement, conforming to the majority of texts by African-American scholars. In this dissertation, the terms "Negro" and "colored" exist only where they were used in the primary or secondary sources. In addition, readers should be aware that many early freedmen considered themselves Muscogee and to simply call all people of

African-American descent in Indian Territory "black" does not describe the complete identity of the Muskogee freedmen. Just in this study, Aaron Bell, Claude Williams, and Ellis Ezell all claim a direct American Indian ancestor, as can Clarence Love who says, "My grandmother on my father's side was from the south; she was Choctaw on her mother's side who married a black man. My grandfather on my mother's side was Cherokee and all my uncles on her side could pass for Indian or white" (Appendix A).

A number of references are made in this study to the concept of a "culture hearth," first explained in terms of regional and historical geography by the father of cultural geography in the United States, Carl O. Sauer, and discussed here in the review of literature. In that light, Muskogee is examined as a burning ember in the culture hearth of the Mississippi River network of musical exchange and growth. Although this project will not argue with the generally-accepted concept that American jazz had some of its origins in New Orleans, the dissertation shows that jazz flourished in Muskogee much in the same way it "originated" in New Orleans, and also demonstrates the evolution of jazz also occurred in Muskogee, Indian Territory, as well as Oklahoma after statehood. Subsequently, Oklahoma was a primary origination point and proving ground for many American jazz musicians, as the players from Oklahoma fed the national mainstream of jazz and all of its subsequent jazz branches.

Therefore, a basic knowledge of jazz history and styles is important for understanding the depth of this study and the historical and critical significance of the jazz musicians from Muskogee. Essentially, a reader should be familiar with of the evolution of jazz from its beginnings as a polyphonic, improvisational form based on a diverse blend of influences including African-American and, possibly, Muskogee musical traditions. In addition to the Southern United States' plantation culture's work songs, and blues, as well as the popular music of the late 1800s and early 1900s, a student of jazz will understand the importance of marching bands, ragtime, and the songs of Tin Pan Alley to the music's evolution.

Following the early era, often referred to as Dixieland, jazz went through primary developments of swing, bebop, cool jazz, fusion, and modern jazz.<sup>3</sup>

Oklahoma's music history is indeed a rich vein of the Southwest's collective jazz past. Among the many jazz musicians who hail from the state, several grew up in towns close to Muskogee, such as Fort Gibson, Beggs, Okmulgee, Haskell, and Tulsa. For the purposes of this study, however, only musicians who were born in Muskogee are included here. One exception could be made for Lee Wiley, a highly acclaimed jazz and big band singer, born in Fort Gibson (across the river from Muskogee), and a perfect illustration of the historic connection between Muskogee and Fort Gibson. Naturally, one exception leads to several. Okmulgee's Oscar Pettiford and Rentiesville's DC Minner both deserve their own studies.<sup>3</sup> Other musicians, including Hobart Banks, Torrence Holder, and Pee Wee Russell, all of whom have some ties to Muskogee and are mentioned in the jazz musicians' oral histories, will be examined in the music history chapters of this study, but they do not receive critical treatments. Although jazz is the music covered most thoroughly in the study, blues and its antecedents of hymns and spirituals are referenced. (A thorough discussion of the Anglo-European musical history of the area would require another study.)

The historical period of study is limited to the years of 1795, or the time of settlement by Europeans at Three Forks, up until the end of World War II. The study does not go into great detail regarding the American Indian and Euro-American migrations into Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory, nor even very far into African-American history outside of the Muscogee (Creek) and Cherokee Nations. Some exception is made when outside populations or governmental changes directly influence the music of the region, or 19th and 20th century African-American society in or around Muskogee. Of course, Muskogee's African-American business district is stressed in this study, but no effort is made to give an entire commercial history of the region during the period covered (1795-1945). Some mention will be made of the social environment of World War II Muskogee,

because a thriving music scene existed as a result of nearby military training bases, which made Muskogee and nearby Rentiesville the destination for many servicemen on weekend passes. The war also drew African-Americans to the West Coast to work in the war time shipping industry, such as noted Oklahoma blues man Lowell Fulson; and, after the war, the entertainment dollars of soldiers and airmen ceased being spent in the city's nightspots. With the subsequent lack of employment opportunities for musicians, and since its brightest products were busy creating be-bop on New York City's 52nd Street and in the after hours clubs in Los Angeles, Muskogee's jazz scene folded, so the historical research ends there, but not without mentioning the newest member of Muskogee's ring of musical honor, Broadway conductor, arranger, and composer Linda Twine, born in Muskogee in 1947.

By the end of this study, it will be clear that the relatively small town of Muskogee, Oklahoma produced eight internationally known jazz musicians because of the African-American community's vitality as a social, economic, moral, and artistic force. Also contributing to the growth of Muskogee as a whole was its geographic position as a commercial and transportation center, as well as being a federal stronghold for dealing with the vast number of national concerns in the area such as American Indians, the discovery of oil, and the non-native incursion by people looking for opportunity in the area, such as this writer's great-grandparents who came to Wagoner, Indian Territory in 1905. Therefore, in order to understand why Muskogee burned as one of the hottest embers in the Mississippi River Valley's cultural hearth, a thorough socio-cultural study of the area is necessary to explain the diverse musical influences and historical developments that created an environment in which jazz could flourish alongside its more often cited geographical neighbors of Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Kansas City, Dallas, St. Louis, and Memphis.

Following the historical chapters about the Three Forks and Muskogee area,



five critical and biographical essays furnish all pertinent material about the eight jazz musicians born in Muskogee from the inception of their careers up until 2000. Two of the musicians, Jay McShann and Claude Williams are still active as of 2000, and more will certainly be written about them after the completion of this study and their careers. After these, a bibliographic survey listing the primary and secondary materials used for this research completes the materials needed for one to undertake more research in related areas of Oklahoma's African-American and jazz history. In addition, the study includes some new perspectives on Muscogee (Creek) music and its potential influence, or at least interconnectedness, on the development of African spirituals and the blues.

Finally, eight unpublished oral histories are presented here from the musicians themselves, to include one from Clarence Love and one from Aaron Bell, and two each from Claude Williams, Jay McShann, and Barney Kessel. The interviews are cited throughout the historical chapters to provide important, eyewitness accounts of Muskogee's music environment and social climate. The interviews are arranged in chronological order according to the musicians' birthdates in Carney's Biographical Dictionary and appear as Appendices A through H.

### **Compact Disc Attachment (In Back Pocket)**

Finally, a compact disc with six recordings is also included in the back pocket of this dissertation. The first track is a Muscogee hymn recorded February, 2000 at Hvtce Cvpv Indian Baptist Church, which sounds similar to what music scholars might normally consider a slave melody and brings about many questions of origin, but certainly illustrates the connection between the African and Muscogee cultures and is an excellent representation of the contemporary preservation of the slave spiritual tradition, no matter its origins. The second track is a traditional Muscogee stomp dance, important for several reasons, discussed in Chapter Two's section on the Muscogee. The third track is a set of musical examples recorded at Claude Williams' Kansas City, Missouri home in 1994, and

in which Williams illustrates the difference between blues and jazz, and plays two early string band songs on his fiddle. The fourth track is a set of solo piano examples from Jay McShann recorded at McShann's Kansas City, Missouri home in 1999 by Oklahoma Historical Society oral historian Rodger Harris. The fifth track is an excerpt from a 1941 recording of Don Byas at an all night jam session in Harlem, New York which illustrates both the full tone for which he is critically lauded, and exemplifies his participation in the evolving bebop scene of that era. The sixth track is a 1973 live recording from Barney Kessel and exemplifies his status as one of the 20th century's top improvisational and harmonic jazz guitarists on his own song "True Blues."

The first two recordings are included to illustrate the musical traditions that existed before the Muscogee and their slaves were removed to Indian Territory in the 1820s. The subsequent four tracks by Muskogee's jazz artists, some of the most important musicians in jazz, show that the men absorbed the earliest elements of the form in the city and region and proceeded to rise to the top of their respective fields. Claude Williams represents the early 20th century string band tradition. Jay McShann displays the merging of many early piano styles, to include barrel house, honky tonk, ragtime, blues, and boogie woogie.<sup>6</sup> Don Byas exhibits his abilities at both the flowing ballad style for which he was known, and the butterfly saxophone keying and harmonic complexity which is a hallmark of bebop. Finally, Barney Kessel exhibits some of the tremendous virtuosic skill which has garnered him the title of the 20th century's greatest improvisational jazz guitarist. Kessel takes the primary riff with which he begins the song, and then turns it inside out with his guitar--a performance philosophy that is at the bedrock of jazz.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jazz musicians Aaron Bell, Don Byas, Barney Kessel, Clarence Love, Jay McShann, Joe Thomas, Walter Thomas, and Claude Williams were all born in Muskogee, Oklahoma. All but Clarence Love achieved significant critical success in 20th century jazz; however, Love's story is just as unique as many in jazz, and his childhood memories of Muskogee, and Kansas, as well as his years as a bandleader, musician, and club owner in Muskogee, Kansas City, and Tulsa, are also important components to the overall story.

<sup>2</sup> Love is referring to Thomas J. Pendergast, notorious Kansas City alderman whose political influence and connection to organized crime is well documented in Pearson's Goin' (83-91).

<sup>3</sup> For a complete survey of the various jazz styles that evolved throughout the 20th century, see Kernfeld's New Grove Dictionary of Jazz, which provides thorough accounts of each stylistic development.

<sup>4</sup> DC Minner's oral history up until 1998 appears in Carney and Foley, "DC."

<sup>5</sup> For current developments in scholarship on the all-Black towns of Oklahoma, including discussion of national interest see "State Museum." The exhibit to which the article refers features more than 150 photos and interactive technology on the all-Black towns, notably, Muskogee is not included in the exhibit's maps of all-Black towns, nor is it the focus of any in-depth discussion. Of course, Muskogee was not an all-Black town, but its significance as an African-American economic and cultural center of the area is continues to be overlooked by scholarship on this subject.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough explanation of jazz piano styles, see Silvester's A Left Hand Like God: A History of Boogie Woogie Piano.

## CHAPTER TWO

### STOKING THE HEARTH: MUSICAL ORIGINS OF THREE FORKS, INDIAN TERRITORY 1796-1861

In order to begin examining the development of the environment in Muskogee, Oklahoma which produced such top-flight jazz musicians as Barney Kessel, Don Byas, Jay McShann, Claude Williams, Aaron Bell and others, a complete review is necessary regarding the cultural beginnings of the area commonly known as Three Forks in northeastern Oklahoma where the Verdigris, Grand, and Arkansas Rivers meet.

Although the Three Forks area is an ancient tribal meeting place, and at the height of "new world" exploration DeSoto reached the confluence of the three rivers in 1540, not until Jean Pierre Choteau came to the site of Salina in 1796, some forty miles north of Three Forks on the Grand River, did European society get a foothold into this region. While George Washington was still President of the United States, Choteau's trading post established the area's first connection to the outside world via New Orleans. Choteau commanded a group of French traders and trappers who established trade agreements with the American Indians of the area, mostly Osage and Caddo, and began to explore the then unknown country along the three rivers (Lackey).

After the location's historical connections to the Caddoan and Spiro Mounds civilizations, the first American Indians in modern history to settle in the area are thought to be a rebel band of the Osage tribe, led by a chief whom the French called Le Chenier, or The Oak, who broke away from the Osage River Towns in the 1780s and took up residence in the Three Forks area (Foley and Rice 47). The arrival of Major Choteau is generally considered as not only the beginning of northeastern Oklahoma's modern civilized development, but as the onset of constructive development in the present day state (Lackey).

The Grand River post established by Choteau thrived from the beginning. Besides the fact that the Osages were outlawed to trade with St. Louis, their only outlet was Choteau's

post, which subsequently loaded the furs on flatboats or rafts and sent them down the Arkansas to the Mississippi, where they were transferred to riverboats for shipment to New Orleans markets (Lackey). This practice established trade between the area and New Orleans as early as 1800.

As other posts opened down river at Three Forks by 1812, Choteau's facility became the regional nexus of the area's trading economy. Subsequently, the Three Forks area became the economic and cultural center of the unsettled territory, as well as the initial point of non-Indian cultural exchange. Cleland terms any place where trappers met at the end of hunting season a "rendezvous," a place where trappers could meet and sell their furs (21). Three Forks certainly must have been such a place. What would have been the culture of these trappers and traders? The trappers were a wily group of men, as one writer describes them, who wore "clothes are of buckskin, gaily fringed at the seams with strings of the same material . . . His waist is encircled with a belt of leather, holding encased his butcher-knife and pistols . . . and a good rifle placed in his hands" (Sage qtd. in Cleland 21, 22). Cleland describes the rendezvous like a medieval fair: ". . . a place of buying, selling, haggling, cheating, gambling, fighting, drinking, palavering, racing, shooting, and carousing," and makes no mention of music, but there certainly must have been a colorful interplay of styles in this festive atmosphere, most likely centering around the fiddle. These rendezvous points were civilization's "outposts in the wilderness and served not only as important trading centers but also as military forts, supply depots, and havens of refuge for trappers, immigrants and other wilderness refugees" (22). Three Forks trading posts would have definitely been such an environment.

Up until the Civil War's start in 1861, five key factors can help explain the cultural development around Three Forks. The first modern development in the area was the fur and salt trade between Three Forks and New Orleans. Next, the establishment and development of Fort Gibson with its subsequent connection to riverboat travel, along with its position as the midway and river crossing points on the Texas Road, also contributed

significantly to the area's evolution. Perhaps the most important element for the production of jazz and jazz musicians, along with the social and economic ramifications of the influence of African-Americans in the area, came with the arrival of the Muscogee (Creek) with their slaves from the Southeastern United States. Also factoring in heavily is the subsequent arrival of the Cherokee with their slaves, and the development of Tahlequah where the area's first printing press and secondary and post-secondary schools were established. Finally, the arrival of the Civil War to the Indian Territory, the ramifications of it for the tribes and their slaves, and the activities of African-American soldiers during the war also greatly influences Three Forks' history.

The Arkansas River was Three Forks' pathway to the world, especially New Orleans, a city which had already boasted of "3,000 free blacks" as early as 1803 (Lichtenstein and Pankner 17). Three Forks became the destination for multiple cultural influences from diverse ports from New York to Europe, and along with those influences come the first scholarly descriptions of the area. When Harvard Professor Thomas Nuttall visited the area in 1819, he saw the potential for the place known as Three Forks: "If the confluence of the Verdigris, Arkansa [sic], and Grand rivers, shall ever become of importance as a settlement, which the great and irresistible tide of western immigration promises, a town will probably be founded here, at the junction of these streams . . ." (192).

### **Traders and Trappers at Three Forks**

Along with the Choteaus, Joseph Bogy was one of the earliest Three Forks traders. As the American people began to move west after the War of 1812, both the population and range of activity began to increase in the Three Forks area. Soon, "merchants, salt manufacturers, farmers, and hunters" joined Bogy in the area (Baird and Goble 97). Other entrepreneurs such as Nathaniel Pryor, Hugh Glenn, George Brand and Henry Barbour also took their turns at operating trading houses at Three Forks, but none was as successful as they would have liked. Not until the Choteaus came back to the area in

1817, and subsequently bought out Brand and Barbour at Three Forks, did tremendous commercial success come to the area. Up until 1824, when steam powered riverboats were able to make the trip to the newly established Fort Gibson, furs and salt were sent to New Orleans in vessels known as keelboats. After unloading the cargo, the boats were disassembled and sold for their lumber. The men who piloted the crafts then made their way back to Three Forks via river and land travel (Lackey). This down and back trip give the first clues of cultural exchange between the two ports of New Orleans and Three Forks. The New Orleans from which the men came, of course, was a musical melange of styles from all over the country, as Russell Sanjek notes,

The only major American seaport on the Gulf of Mexico, New Orleans was the journey's end for thousands of flatboats that ran with the current and brought cargo and the music of the eastern seaboard from Pittsburgh and the coast. After 1815, speedy keelboats, and by the late 1820s, river steamboats manned by Irish firemen and black deckhands, carried not only the luxuries and necessities of life, but also the latest social ballads and black music to this center of a fast growing nation.

(125)

Although Sanjek does not consider the western tributaries of the Mississippi, such as the Arkansas from which the Three Forks keelboats were coming, he does make a point that anyone coming into the New Orleans waterfront in this period would be subject to any number of musical influences.

To contextualize one instance of African-influenced music so early in the 19th century, one finds a very interesting description of New Orleans from architect Benjamin Latrobe, whose *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary and Sketches 1818-1820* describes both the instruments and the polyrhythmic and call-and-response musical techniques of African-Americans playing and singing at what was not yet known as New Orleans' Congo Square in February of 1819:

The music consisted of two drums and stringed instrument. An old man sat astride

of a cylindrical drum about a foot in diameter, & beat it with incredible quickness with the edge of his hand & fingers. The other drum was an open staved thing held between the knees & beaten in the same manner. . . . The most curious instrument, however, was a stringed instrument which no doubt was imported from Africa. On the top of the finger board was the rude figure of a man in a sitting posture, & two pegs behind him to which the strings were fastened. The body was a calabash . . . The women squalled out a burthen to the playing at intervals, consisting of two notes, as the negroes, working in our cities, respond to the song of their leader. (50)

Latrobe does not pile on the praise when he describes the style of dancing commonly known as the cakewalk in today's African-American music histories. Neither is he vastly impressed with the different types of percussive instruments used by the musicians and the style of singing by one man who "sung [sic] an uncouth song to the dancing which I suppose was in some African language, for it was not in French, & the women screamed a detestable burthen on one single note" (51). Latrobe is just one of many writers who belittle the tribal music of Africans or American Indians when comparing it to the gentility and Eurocentrism of their own musical tastes, but he does at least record its occurrence.

To better illustrate the African-American traditions evolving in the early 19th century, Eileen Southern, author of The Music of Black Americans, writes that "the most musical black folk of the antebellum period may well have been the men working on the waters and waterfronts of the United States" (147). Negroes were employed as wharf workers, cargo men, fire men (stoking the fires of the steamboats), and working in the food services on boats that went back and forth on the rivers. "In many instances," Southern says, "they also served as entertainers, providing shows of the vaudeville type for the boat passengers at the end of the day's labor and music for dancing afterward" (147). With the establishment of Fort Gibson in 1824 and the subsequent arrival of the first steamboats, some music aboard them, and as we will see, there was.



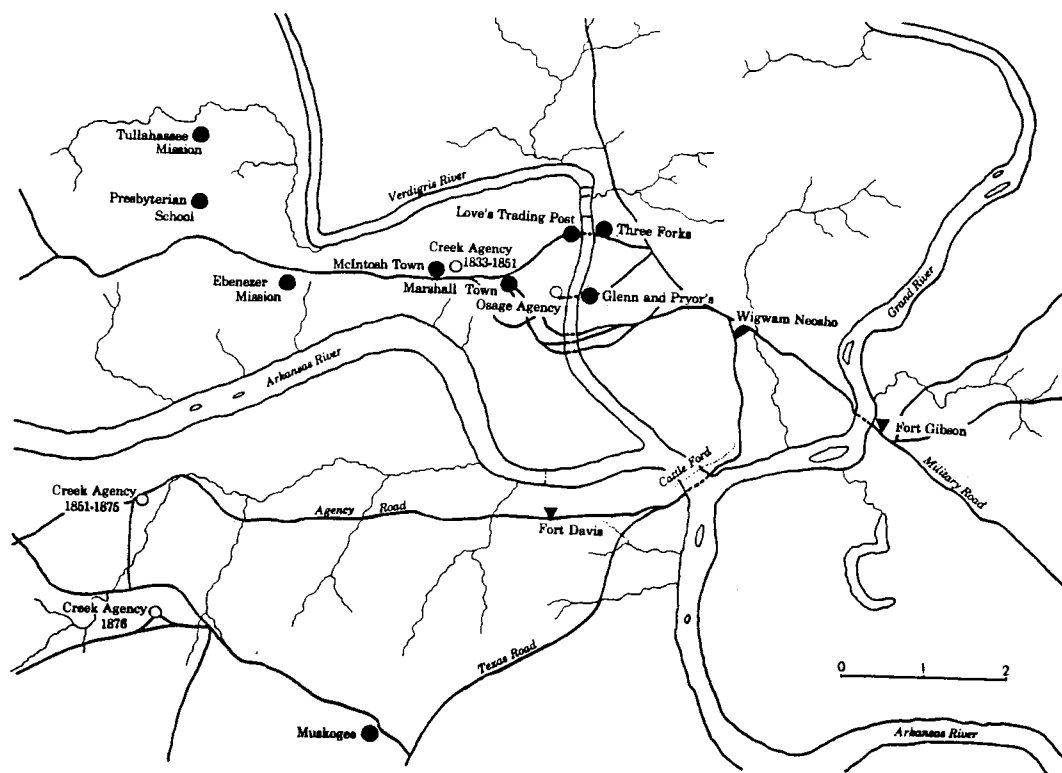


Fig. 3. Three Forks Area, map 37 from John W. Morris, et. al., Historical Atlas of Oklahoma (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

## **Fort Gibson**

Thorough histories have been written on the military chronology of Fort Gibson (Boydston, Faulk Muskogee, and Lackey), but what has not been given much attention is the musical history of the area. As Gardner writes, "We wish that more were known of the events of cheerfulness, merriment, laughter and exhilaration that were undoubtedly experienced at Fort Gibson. Brief references to the orchestra, the horserace track and other forms of amusement testify to the times of entertainment about the fort" (217). Mentions of music are indeed rare throughout the variety of books and articles to be found about the fort, but research has unearthed a few details showing some of what was going on there.

Because the military history of Fort Gibson is well documented, the focus here is limited to events contributing directly to the music of the area. One of the very first officers at Fort Gibson, J.L. Dawson, who surveyed and oversaw the military road from Fort Gibson to Fort Smith and laid out the first horse race track at Fort Gibson, was a musician. Although there is no mention of what Dawson played, Gardner tells us that he "was a musician and probably was active in supplying instrumental music at the fort" (219). Dawson is often referred to as the "Lost Captain" by many historians because many of his trails are difficult to follow and apparently he was prone to taking off and resurfacing from time to time. Gardner says that, "The fact that he spoke French, that he was a fine musician and was a handsome man are about the only traditions in reference to him that were handed down to the descendents (sic)" (237). By 1827, Dawson had overseen the completion of a 56 mile road from Fort Gibson to Fort Smith allowing difficult but passable overland travel. The bulk of materials, supplies, and other goods came via the Arkansas River.

According to Louis Hunter, author of Steamboats on the Western Rivers, in 1824 the first steamboat to made its way to Fort Gibson bringing 109 troops and supplies to what he calls "the head of navigation for the Arkansas River" (51). This statement contradictsto

Phil Harris who says, "It was not until February, 1828, that the first steamboat appeared in the Three Forks Country, the 'Facility', with two keelboats in tow bringing 780 Creek Indian men, women and children to their new home in the vicinity of the mouth of the Verdigris" (68). Of course, it would be the Muscogee Creeks who would settle in what became present-day Muskogee, as that is where the Creek Agency would eventually be established. Harris writes that soon the "Black Hawk," "Little Rock," "Arkansas Traveler," "Violette" and "Lady Walton" followed the "Facility" up the Arkansas to the Three Forks (68). Discovering the shipping records of these vessels might provide us with some more clues as would the records of the firms of Henry, Cunningham and Company and P.H. White and Company out of Van Buren, Arkansas, both of whom competed for the freight business on the Arkansas in the pre-war period (Aldrich, "General" 126). Aldrich also tells us this river travel allowed Fort Gibson merchants to order materials from wholesalers in St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia and New Orleans (126). This trade comes into play more when we talk about the Cherokee government's settlement in Tahlequah in 1836. Nonetheless, Harris writes, "steamboats continued to carry merchandise to the Three Forks area as late as 1861 before being practically suspended by the Civil War" (68).

Another important trade route that passed by Fort Gibson became known as the Texas Road, but had been a tribal path for many years even before it became known as the Osage trace, running the 300 miles from Three Forks to Saint Louis. Today it is US Highway 69. Going south, the trail entered Oklahoma in its northeastern corner and followed the Grand River to Fort Gibson, crossed the mouth of the Grand and the Verdigris by ferry, and then angled south-southwest to Fort Washita before crossing the Red River at Colbert's Ferry (Faulk, Muskogee 23). Travelers making the trip included those headed south to Stephen F. Austin's colony in the Mexican province of Texas. Mexican merchants went both directions, going north with trade goods and returning with items to be sold in Mexico. Hunters, traders, adventurers, stagecoaches (good for a number of

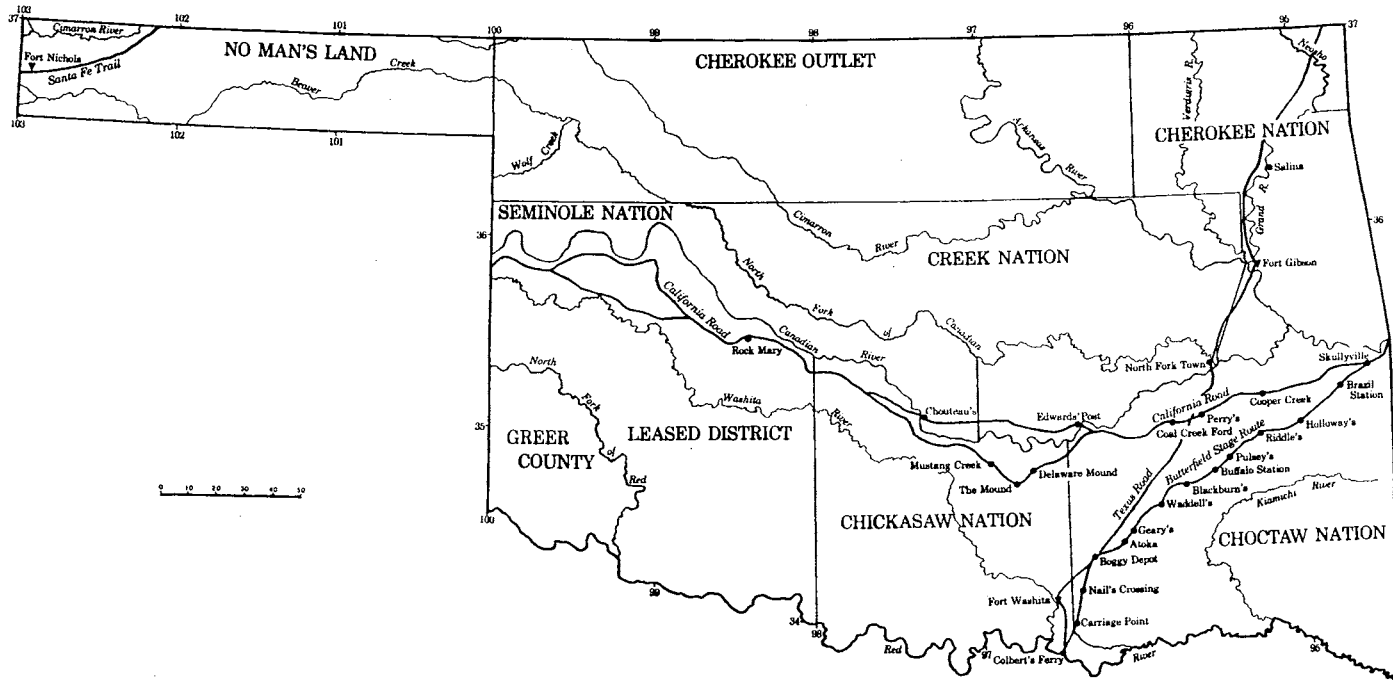


Fig. 4. Important Routes and Trails in Oklahoma, map 24 from John W. Morris, et. al.,  
 Historical Atlas of Oklahoma (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

hold up scenes), missionaries, cattle, horses traversed this path (Faulk, Muskogee 23). Muskogee historian C.W. West describes the Texas Road as "an important route for settlers headed for Texas and for commerce coming out of Mexico towards mid-America" (Muskogee 1). West also notes this important road also intersected with the important river route of the Arkansas at Three Forks (1). In 1846, an army officer traveled the Texas Road from Fort Gibson to St. Louis, by way of Maysville, Bentonville, Springfield, and Waynesville. Lieutenant Abert said in his report: "The way from Fort Gibson was literally lined with wagons of emigrants to Texas and from this time until we arrive at Saint Louis, we continued to see hundreds of them" (Foreman, "Early" 117). As Faulk flatly states, "The Three Forks area thus was the commercial and business center of Indian Territory" (Muskogee 28).

Because of its proximity to Three Forks, Fort Gibson's influence was paramount. As Faulk writes,

The building of what became known as Fort Gibson did much to stimulate steam navigation of the Arkansas to the Three Forks area. Within a month [after it was completed] the *Florence* departed Little Rock bound for Fort Gibson carrying 30 tons of freight and recruits for the Seventh Infantry. The following year the *Spartan* and *Louisville* likewise made this run, and thereafter steamboats regularly plied the waters of the Arkansas to bring supplies not only for the troops but also for the merchants and traders gathering in the vicinity. (Muskogee 15)

According to Faulk, "The decade of the 1830s marked the zenith of Fort Gibson's importance . . . It was during this period that the fort became a focus of national public interest and a prime source of information on Indian relations and the opening of the Southwestern frontier" (Early 29). The authors describe the scene at Fort Gibson as "bustling" and that steamboat landings were a major event, "as they signaled the arrival of visitors, supplies, mail and news to the otherwise isolated outpost" (30). Although the authors do not say on which boat these materials arrived, they do cite cargo including

"everything from hat brushes and violin strings to cologne water and silk purses" (30).

Although it is difficult to date, an entry in West's Fort Gibson: Gateway to the West recounts the voices of the riverboat men echoing from the landing: "Mrs. Laswell recalls her grandmother's telling her that on occasion she went to the fort bakery to buy bread and often heard the Negroes chanting songs as they unloaded the steamboats" (134).

At this time, the Choteaus still operated their trading company out of Three Forks, however, by 1832 they had switched to salt mining. It was in this year that American author Washington Irving made his now famous tour of the prairies through Indian Territory, during which he came across Choteau's trading village and described it in colorful detail: ". . . there was a sprinkling of trappers, hunters, half-breeds, Creoles, negroes of every hu [sic]; and all that other rabble rout of nondescript beings that keep about the frontiers" (10). This description fits the idea that Oklahoma in general, but in this case the Three Forks area, began as a cultural crossroads where several ethnicities were grouped together and had the opportunity to be influenced by one another.

Possibly yet another source of music, although it is not documented, is the large amount of illegal whiskey that made its way into Indian Territory. An 1835 letter from Lt. William W. Mather describes the surroundings of Fort Gibson as "a small village of houses, stores, kitchens, hospital, [and] tavern" ("Reports" 206). We can get a sense of the kind of liquors coming into the area from a letter written by Sam Houston, who had reunited with some of his Cherokee associates from Tennessee in Indian Territory in 1830, to the commander of Fort Gibson, Colonel Arbuckle:

I ordered to this point for my own use, and the convenience of my establishment five Barrels of whiskey, four of Mongahala, and one of corn. One Barrel of Cogniac [sic], one Gin, one rum and two barrels of wine. (Houston 186)

One might easily write a history of the liquor trade in the Three Forks area, the battle over which went right up on through the prohibition era of the 1920s. For our purposes, however, it is interesting to note that some of the first songs that anyone has transcribed as

being sung in Indian Territory are temperance songs done to the tune of "Yankee Doodle" by the Cherokees in Tahlequah (Holway 22). In researching how the Cherokees might have learned the tune of "Yankee Doodle" in the first place, one finds more information pointing to the possible influences of the military band at Fort Gibson.

Apparently, in 1844 the commander of Fort Gibson was Gustavus Loomis who had a regimental band at his disposal and took pleasure in taking it to play for temperance meetings at Park Hill for the noted missionary to the Cherokees, Rev. Samuel A. Worcester (Foreman, "Gustavis" 218). According to Fairfax Downey, most bands of this period were made up of drum, fife and bugle (72). The band at Fort Gibson was said to be "The best in the U.S. Army . . . and there was great lamentation in the Worcester house when Col. Loomis with his regiment and the band was ordered to the Mexican War" (Foreman, "Fort Gibson" 291). Congressional records show that as of 1835, each regiment was authorized to form a band of 10 musicians. In 1845 the strength of the original band was increased to 16 men (United States 23). It is difficult to tell which size band existed at Fort Gibson before they went off to Mexico.

Martial music was not the only melodic sound coming from Fort Gibson, however, as Garrett notes in reference to a piano recital where an American Indian in native dress surprised everyone by playing classical music. The pianist had been educated back East as a result of coming from a well-to-do family in Indian Territory. Garrett also goes so far as to call Fort Gibson the cultural center of the area: "Fort Gibson . . . was the center of not only military life in the Cherokee Nation, but of social life" (343).

Fort Gibson obviously played a pivotal part in the development of the Three Forks area, but the Muscogee (Creek) and Cherokee, both of whom brought slaves, also contributed greatly to the cultural milieu.

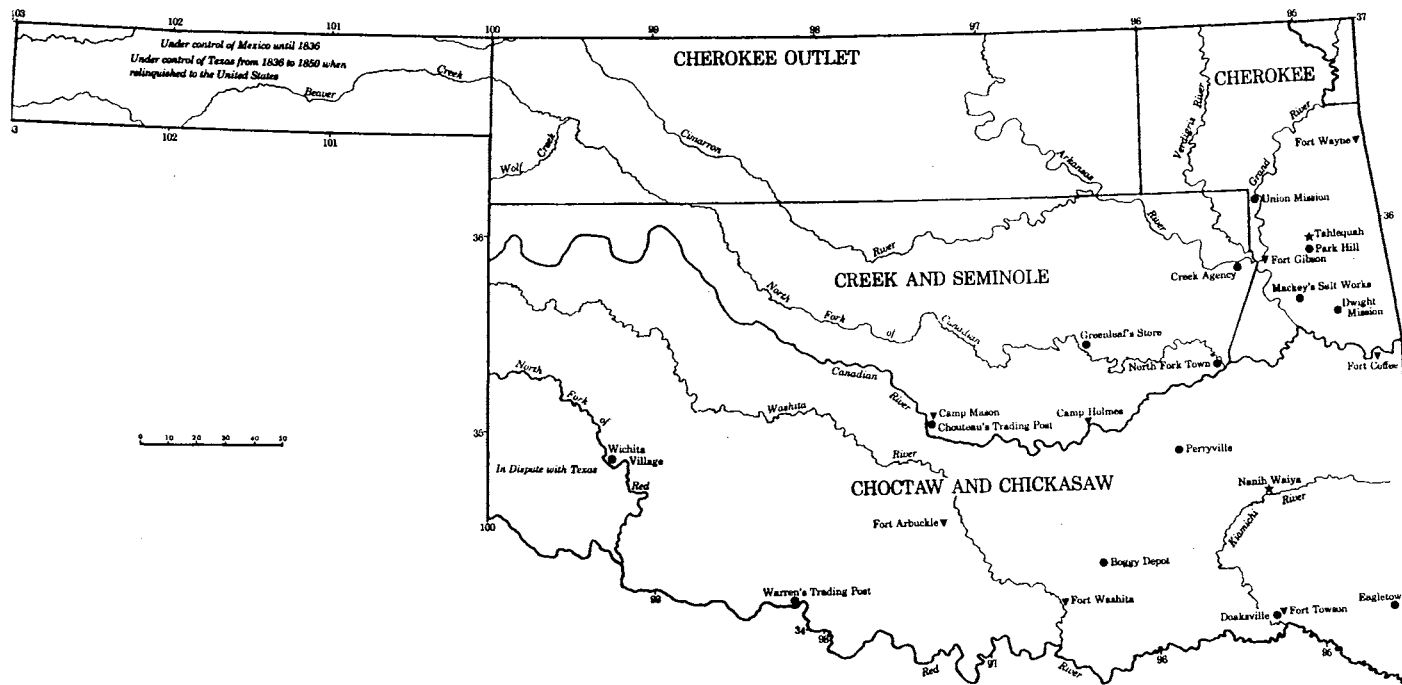


Fig. 5. Indian Territory (1830-1855), map 23 from John W. Morris, et. al., Historical Atlas of Oklahoma (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).



## **The Muscogee (Creek) Nation: Forced Immigrants and Slave Owners**

Before removal to Indian Territory, the Muscogee Creek Nation's domain comprised a large portion of the present states of Alabama and Georgia. Various estimates place the population of the tribe from eleven to twenty-four thousand, living in fifty to eighty towns along the rivers and creeks of the region, hence the English came to call the confederacy of Muskogean speaking peoples "Creeks" (Debo Road 3). Often, the Muscogees are referred to as one of the "Five Civilized Tribes," because the tribes adapted some of the white man's "civilized" ways, such as adhering to Christianity, using the printing press, organizing constitutional government, farming individually, and maintaining slaves. However, some scholars propose that life as a slave was not as harsh under the tribes as with the whites. Teall explains, "the Creeks . . . showed the least racial prejudice and it was only after close contact with whites that they adopted some of the same [racist] attitudes" (19). Even after removal, some slaves lived under at least humane conditions with the Muscogees. Nellie Johnson, a former slave interviewed as part of the 1937-38 Federal Slave Narrative Project under the administrative umbrella of the Works Progress Administration, explains the relative freedom experienced by Muscogee slaves in Indian Territory, as opposed to slaves owned by other tribes or non-Indians:

. . . we didn't have to be under any overseer like the Cherokee Negroes had lots of times. . . . We didn't have to work if they wasn't no work to do that day. . . . Everybody can have a little patch of his own, too, and work it between times . . . What he made on that patch belongs to him, and the old Chief never bothered the slaves about anything. (Baker 226)

Even though life may have been tolerable for slaves of Muscogee Creeks, the slaves experienced the same harshness as their owners on the trip from Georgia and Alabama to Indian Territory.

Following the war against the Muscogee Creeks in 1813 and 1814, the U.S. Government began making arrangements for the Muscogees of upper and lower Alabama

and Georgia to give up their land and move to Indian Territory. William Savage gives a complete, detailed survey of the historical events leading up to the removal of the Creeks to Indian Territory in his essay "Creek Colonization in Oklahoma." After arrangements had been made with the Osages for land around Three Forks, the first Creeks came in February of 1828 aboard the previously mentioned steamboat *Fidelity* (Road Debo 95). By the end of the year, over 1300 had arrived and, according to Debo, "In general they were prosperous mixed bloods, who began with their slaves to lay out plantations along the rich river valley" (95). Although not as elaborate as their white Southern counterparts nor as lavish as some of the homes the Cherokees would have to leave behind, Muscogee plantation life in Indian Territory began humbly, "consisting of the owner's double-log house, with slave cabins, smoke-house, barns, corrals, stables, and kennels for hunting dogs" (Fischer 16). If the planter was successful, he upgraded: "[replacing] their log houses with elaborate frame houses, equipped with a library, piano. . . and other luxuries known in the better white homes in the East" (Fischer 16).

While the slaveowners improved their lot when possible, finding out how life was for the slave, an oppressive condition for anyone no matter how kind the owner, is more problematic. One place to begin is the plantation culture itself. In a review and quantitative appraisal of the first publication of the ex-slave narratives, Monroe Billington explains the technical requirements for a plantation: ". . . a plantation is defined as a farming unit of a minimum of 500 acres (at least 200 of which were in cultivation) upon which lived and worked at least 20 slaves" (59). In addition, Billington surmises that a "higher proportion of Indian-owned slaves lived on plantations than did non-Indian slaves" (60). In addition to exhibiting the relative wealth of the slave holding tribes, one might surmise that the same culture that allowed the evolution of the blues to flower in the Mississippi Delta also existed in the Three Forks area, as it was connected to the Delta via the Arkansas and certainly would have been affected by cultural diffusion from that area. As Peretti writes, "[Jazz and blues] were in part nurtured in the same general region, in the

'Delta' along the Mississippi River between Memphis and New Orleans. Many musicians who later became important early jazz musicians in New Orleans began their lives in the Delta's plantations (Creation 17).

The difference between Indian Territory and the South might be found solely in the fact that it was primarily the mixed-blood American Indians who held the slaves instead of white plantation owners. As Billington notes about the first printing of the slave narratives: "Many of the Indian-held slaves said they were never or seldom punished, but their vivid recollections of others receiving punishment reminds the present-day reader of one of the worst aspects of American slavery" (63). Muscogee slaves "lived on individual farms, accumulated personal property, and moved about with relative ease" (Baird and Goble 156). Certainly some of the property acquired would have been musical instruments. There was a good deal of racial mixing as well in the area which would have furthered blurred the borders of cultural diffusion as well. Since African-Americans did have a little more freedom of movement than they would have had otherwise in the South, it is no surprise that their participation in churches began to swell not long after arriving at Three Forks.

By the middle 1830s, missionaries came into the area to set up churches and by 1832 several Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches established themselves in the area. African-Americans were active in the churches, laying the groundwork for a long tradition of African-American spiritual music in and around Three Forks. By 1836, however, more of the Muscogee were scheduled to come into the land from Alabama. The missionaries who were initially tolerated became resented as organizers of the African-American population and potential advocates for abolition. In a council held at Fort Gibson, the Muscogee decided to expel the missionaries and impose a penalty of 50 or 100 lashes to anyone who attended a Christian service. Debo writes that small groups met anyway to sing "negro spirituals and portions of Creek hymns they could remember" (Debo Road 116-18).

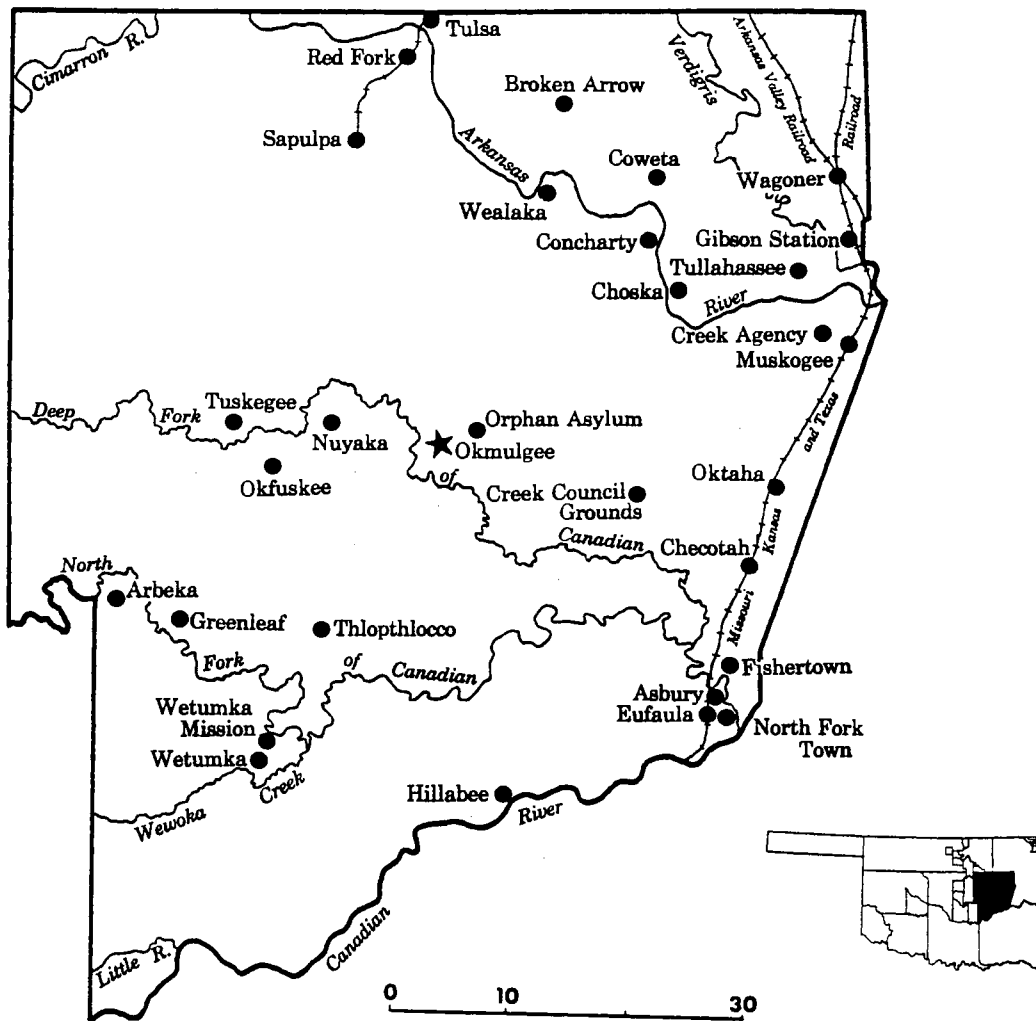


Fig. 6. Creek Nation: Important Places, map 41 from John W. Morris, et. al., Historical Atlas of Oklahoma (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

While indicating the way in which the two groups of people mixed in worship, the idea that the two forms existed simultaneously and drew from one another is a tantalizing prospect.

Although some scholars believe that African-American spirituals had no authors and were handed down as folklore from one generation to the next, two Choctaw slaves are given credit for "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away to Jesus" before 1865 (Baird and Goble 156). Even if they did not compose the songs, which still leaves the question open as to who composed the earliest slave spirituals, the fact that those two famous songs were first transcribed in Indian Territory and subsequently made famous by groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, certainly shows that the area is rich enough in African-American culture to foster the significant development of the music that evolved out of spirituals, the blues, alongside Oklahoma's more famous neighbor states. However, as a result of my attendance and recordings at the Hvtce Cvpv Indian Baptist Church in Okfuskee County, Oklahoma, the oldest Muscogee hymns sound hauntingly close to the recordings music historians typically call old time spirituals, which are the slow, mournful dirges of forced slavery. Determining the origins of these hymns could literally rewrite twentieth century music history and lead musical scholars to some very profound changes in the way they have conceived of the development of American popular music. The commonly held notion about the evolution of rock is that it evolved from a hybrid of blues, country and r & b, manifesting itself for the masses in the popular personage of Elvis Presley. The blues part of the equation is commonly thought to have originated in the work songs, field hollers, and spirituals of African slaves in the South, all of which had varying degrees of the primary touchstones of African folk music, i.e., call and response, sliding pitches, polyrhythm, and the notion of a "blue note" that is commonly part of the blues scale, or those flatted notes which color a given note with the quality of sounding sad or mournful. However, given the location of the Muscogee in Georgia and Alabama when slaves began arriving in the area, and the fact of the Muscogee having slaves and

allowing the slaves to worship both in their own services and with the Muscogee in churches set up by the missionaries, could it be possible that African slaves learned their hymns from the Muscogee? If not, then were the Muscogee at least part of the African slave spiritual tradition heretofore only mentioned in the vaguest of historical observations? If so, then Muscogee hymns might be considered a first simultaneous step in the evolution of American blues, jazz, and rock, alongside the African-American traditions. For many scholars this idea will prove to be an outrageous notion; however, on listening to the recording included on the compact disc in this dissertation one can certainly hear the similarity between an old Muscogee Hymn and what is commonly called an African-American slave spiritual (Track 1 on compact disc). A professional musical review discerns the key of the song to be in B flat minor, filled with what are commonly known as "blue notes." Interestingly, Courlander explores the notion of a blue note by describing it as "the partially flatted third and seventh notes" of a scale "(E-flat and B-flat in the key of C)" (18). Courlander also mentions that the fifth tone is often used in modern jazz as a blue note (19). The Hvtce Cvpv hymn deep in blue notes with five flats. How does this come to be part of the current Hvtce Cvpv Muscogee church tradition? Kaye Teall notes that "Hatchachachubba Tom" had one slave, which at least links the modern church name taken from an old Alabama tribal town with someone who had a slave in 1832, but that connection is not enough to discern much (Black 29). Courlander even admits that "the cultural source for the partially flatted thirds and sevenths has not been established" (19). The origins of "blue notes" may seem like a snipe hunt, but enough conflicting material and current evidence suggest much more can be said on the subject.

In addition to the sound of the Muscogee hymns, some of the tribe's social songs also sound like they maintain the textual or subject matter of blues. Even the most casual blues listener must acknowledge the similarity between what we normally think of as spirituals

and blues and the following description of non-ceremonial music described by ethnologist Frank Speck, who traveled among the Muscogee in 1904 and 1905:

There is a certain exuberance of spirits among the men which at times finds its expression in bursts of song. When riding along the trail in lonely places, or at night when everything is quiet, in fact whenever the feeling seizes them, they break out into these plaintive strains to drive away sprits which make them feel sad or lonesome, as they say. Of these snatches, or burdens we might call them, there are several which seem to be used indiscriminately when the mind is weighted with emotions of amorousness, loneliness, sorrow, joy, or other excitement. Drunken men may be frequently heard singing this way. Some of the Indians call the songs "drinking songs" on this account. The syllables are without meaning, and the theme is repeated with some variation in the syllables and in the stress and tones according largely to individual fancy. ("The Creek" 120)

Obviously, the idea of improvising on the original theme of a song is primary to the performance of jazz, and the subject matter and occurrence of these songs certainly bears a resemblance to the blues. The question as to which came first is complicated enough, but the possibilities for study are wide open in attempting to connect these musical traditions. Carney suggests as much when he writes, "The complex relationships between white spirituals and black spirituals are not yet wholly clear. What is known is that both types of spirituals arose out of the evangelical songs of the great revivals in the American South and West in the period after 1800" (Sounds 17). Carney does not mention the Muscogee who are obviously intertwined with the musical traditions of the Anglo missionaries and the African slaves, and may have even acted as a kind of intermediary, or stylistic broker. Although an elusive and enticing area of study that may evolve into a new foundation for the influences on blues and jazz in the Southern United States, some ethnomusicological research has proposed the musical connections between the Africans and the American Indians of the Southeast. Although inconclusive by his own admission,

ethnomusicologist George Herzog discovered one group of Cherokee who were maintaining some African musical traditions. He writes, "it is refreshing to find that stylistic features and melodies undoubtedly of African origin have survived among Indians in the Southeastern states of this country, owing to contacts and even to a certain amount of intermixture between Indians and Negroes. These features have become incorporated into the local Indian music idiom and have to some extent become integrated with it" (131). And, even if the Muscogee did learn their hymns from Africans, Herzog emphasizes the music "provides for an unusually rewarding study of stylistic hybridization" (131). Finally, Herzog notes the irony of this musical style being practiced by American Indians:

African music may have become extinguished in this country among the descendants of those who brought it here. If so, it is doubly interesting that we owe our clearest glimpses of its character and history on our soil to survivals in Indian music, which was first hospitable enough to receive a foreign idiom and then conservative enough to preserve it. (143)

The subject of which tradition came first is not the focus of this study, but is one of the most interesting and unexpected revelations from this research, and more work certainly needs to be accomplished to help explain the cross-cultural connections between these two groups of people.

More is known contemporarily about the Muscogee ceremonial music, usually referred to as stomp dances.<sup>1</sup> The ceremonial ground music of 2000 is not unlike that described by Angie Debo, who apparently attended a Muscogee Green-Corn Festival, or *buskita*:

The dances were accompanied by the beating of a drum made by stretching rawhide over an iron pot or the end of a hollow log, the shaking of gourd rattles, and the clattering of dried terrapin shells filled with pebbles, which were worn on the legs of the women. Songs were used describing or expressing appreciation for the subject honored by the dance. (Road 293)



The songs surrounding the ceremonials go beyond expressing "appreciation for the subject" of the dance, and many of the songs give thanks, tell the stories of individuals, tribal town histories, and also include lighter social songs about subjects such as animals and love. Largely, song topics can range widely depending on the leader and where the song fits into the ceremonial cycle. In addition, through personal observation as a guest at Muscogee ceremonial grounds, I have witnessed some of the same call-and-response and polyrhythmic techniques are present in Muscogee Creek ceremonial music that are generally associated with jazz, as well as other music forms associated with African origins (Compact Disc Track 2).

Initially, the music represents the tribal music of perhaps the most civil group of Americans who took African tribal people as slaves. Not enough consideration has been given to the tribal notions of newly arrived slaves and the ancient tribal traditions being practiced by the Muscogee, or other Southeastern tribes. If the Muscogee were the most lenient of American Indian slaveholders, certainly some of the slaves would have at least known about the Muscogee ceremonials, as well as the Muscogee hymn tradition. Having already heard the slow, mournful melody of the Muscogee hymn, one should listen to this recording for the first, low notes sung by the men and notice how those notes are very similar to the low notes of the hymn. Then, one can hear the polyrhythmic accompaniment of the women shell shakers, and, as the song evolves, the call and response formula for the leader and singers. Of course, polyrhythm and call and response formulas are two basic tenets of African tribal music, so the similarity should not be interpreted as original to the Muscogee; however, the opportunity for influences and cross-cultural fertilization are obvious.

One does not have to go any further than Bo Diddley's famous 1955 hit "Bo Diddley" for an example of how a rattle, polyrhythm, and call and response vocals create the most African tribal-sounding song in rock and roll. One can only imagine how slaves perceived Muscogee ceremonial music, always performed at night around a fire in those times; yet it

must have been at least a familiar combination of the musical principles the two tribal peoples had in common. The descendants of both groups would certainly be aware of it as the Muscogee and the Africans intermarried, as did the Muscogee and the Europeans. Music researchers may have to contemplate the notion of an African slave synthesizing Muscogee spirituals, various ceremonial and social stomp dance songs, and his own African tribal traditions, uniting a sacred and social tradition to produce a new musical form that would eventually change the course of popular music.

As a whole the Muscogee seem to be more diverse musically than many have often thought, as is often the case with those who create indigenous music. Debo notes the Muscogee commonly made music for their private enjoyment with "Violins made of gourds and with raccoon or squirrel skin strings," and also handmade "A native instrument similar to the flute, made of a reed or piece of hollowed hardwood with holes at intervals, [which] was used especially by the young men in courting" (295). Certainly, more work should be done to determine the depth of the Muscogee's musical influence on African-Americans, or vice-versa, although the Muscogee were not the only tribe who came to Three Forks, Indian Territory. The Cherokee, with their own traditions, their own slaves, and their own ties to the Europeans as far back as the British colonists, moved in right across the Arkansas River.

### **The Cherokees**

Although the Cherokees certainly had their native musical traditions, including war songs, courting songs on flutes, stomp dances, and hymns, they were no strangers to the stereotyped savagery associated with American Indians by popular cliché in the early 19th century (Woodward 41, 42). As a rule, the music of all American Indians has been marginalized by music scholars who tend to categorize the music as merely indigenous, (and therefore not part of the European tradition) or classify it as world music worthy of study only as an anthropological enterprise. Certainly, American Indian melodies had

enough impact on a 20th century composer like Aaron Copland for him to consider them a necessary reference point for his music.<sup>1</sup> And, contrary to this notion of American Indian primitiveness, however, some of the first Cherokees to emigrate to Indian Territory in 1837 were actually considered upper class: "Accompanied by Negro slaves, saddle horses, and droves of fat oxen, these Cherokees traveled overland through Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas to their new homes, reaching their destination in time to put in spring crops" (Woodward 195).

Other Cherokee were not so lucky. Many contracted every disease imaginable as they crossed through the wilderness alternately by river and overland travel during harsh winter seasons. Of the 18,000 Cherokees who made the trip after the Treaty of 1835, about 4,000 died either in stockades prior to removal from their homes in Tennessee and Georgia, or on the journey west (Woodward 218). For those who arrived successfully, arrangements were made for them to begin reclaiming items they had been forced to give up before departing for the west. Woodward writes that "Sally, a Cherokee woman from the Chickamauga district, claimed the former ownership of six ducks, a plaid cloak, a feather bed, a set of china, two blow guns, a fiddle, and other items" (212). "Cherokee Fiddle" contests, a lingering ritual from those early settlement days, are still held yearly at the Cherokee Nation homecoming on Labor Day Weekend. Tribal music generally associated with American Indians was not something all Cherokees brought with them to Indian Territory, because many had already accepted the hymns and sermons of missionaries such as Samuel A. Worcester, who set up the first printing press in Indian Territory. Of course, some traditional people maintained the Ancient ceremonial traditions and "new" music, both of which still exist in pockets of the modern Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Garrett reports that "Tribal music had little if any place among the Cherokees of the Cherokee Nation West (1839-1907), but the Cherokee love of music was not without expression" (348). The Cherokees tended to sing the music of the missionaries. William Lee, in his article "Lowell Mason, Samuel A. Worcester, and the

Cherokee Singing Book," explains that Cherokees "proved themselves . . . adaptable to Euro-American music," and, in fact, sang hymns from a collaboration between Worcester and "one of the most influential nineteenth-century musicians in the United States, Lowell Mason" (33). This hymnal became known in alternate versions as *The Cherokee Singing Book* or *Cherokee Hymn Book* and was used widely by tribal members who had intermarried with Southern settlers and thereby developed close ties to white society and culture (Lee 34). Although having little influence on the music that became jazz, the interaction between the Cherokees and Southern traders had a significant impact on the Three Forks area when the Cherokees settled in the area of present-day Tahlequah.

Perhaps, the most influential aspect of the Cherokees' arrival was the business acumen they had developed in dealing with the traders of their native Tennessee, Georgia area, a feature which reflected the tribe's desire to reflect a "civilized" culture. Aldrich explains,

Immediately upon arrival in the Indian Territory the Cherokees established general stores. Functioning as service centers for nearby agriculturists, the Cherokee stores catered to farm demands. Selling nails, cloth, rifles, medicines, dry goods, needles, yarns, farm implements, and practically every other item manufactured in the United States or Europe, the Cherokee general stores carried products identical to those sold in white frontier communities. ("General" 124)

Chosen as the site of the new Cherokee capital because of its centrality in the Cherokee Nation, Tahlequah became the most important city in Indian Territory in 1839 when the assembly of Eastern and Western Cherokees met to discuss tribal laws and treaties. If the 1830s and 40s had been the decades of Fort Gibson, the 1850s was the decade Tahlequah came to prominence. After the Treaty of 1846,

The Cherokee Nation enjoyed a golden era of prosperity and progress unsurpassed by its territorial neighbors. In the era that followed the treaty, education, building projects (both private and public), churches and missions, improvement societies,

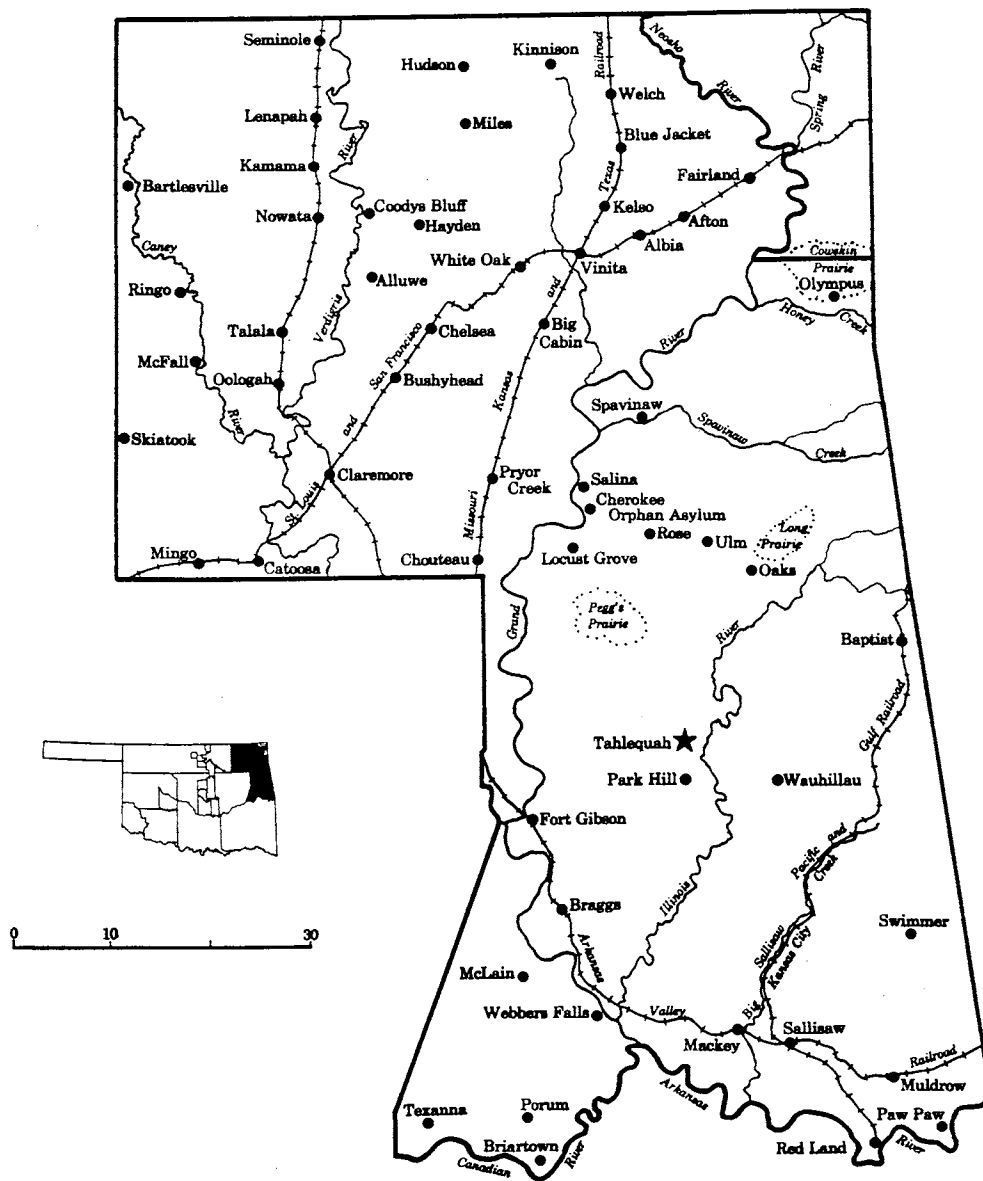


Fig. 7. Cherokee Nation: Important Places, map 36 from John W. Morris, et. al., Historical Atlas of Oklahoma (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

agriculture, domestic arts, and animal husbandry thrived in the Nation. (Woodward 238)

By 1851, the Cherokees had opened two seminaries, one for women and one for men, at which students were required to study "such subjects as Latin, algebra, botany, vocal music, geography, grammar, and arithmetic" (Woodward 243). The opening day ceremonies featured, among other festivities, General Belknap's military band from Fort Gibson: "In the afternoon when the exercises in the house were over, the band stationed themselves out in the blackjack woods back of the building, and the company, gentlemen and ladies in pairs, promenaded round and round to the music of the band" (Woodward 244). Again we see the cultural exchange between Fort Gibson and Tahlequah as common, although the tunes played by the band would give us more insight into the moment, as would a description of the instrumental configuration of the group. Perhaps future research will turn up more details of this band.

The seminaries contributed significantly to the social environment of the area. "Prior to the closing of the two seminaries in 1856," writes Woodward, "there were many elegant weddings, concerts, and collations at the Female Seminary" (248). Cherokee education law required women to take vocal music lessons, but almost every Seminary girl could play piano as well. Garret explains, "So keen was the desire for music lessons that in time the one part-time singing teacher. . .gave way to a staff of three who devoted all their time to music" (343).

All was not sophisticated elegance, however, as the work of Dr. Samuel Worcester, missionary and print shop operator, attests. The consumption of liquor and its potentially negative implications were always of primary concern to the missionaries and the Christian Cherokee leaders. The initial issue of the Territory's first newspaper, the *Cherokee Messenger* (August, 1844) deals with the pact among "Indians" to forsake the alcohol which was widely available in "grogshops" just across the state line in Arkansas. The article mentions the "lowliness" of these "dens" (1).

Not only did Dr. Worcester organize "The Cold Water Army" to fight the importation of liquor which he felt would ruin the Nation, he was also responsible for a great deal of the Cherokee around Tahlequah. Worcester wrote temperance songs and also taught the children to march and sing to them (Woodward 249). One can imagine riding into the town square of Tahlequah and seeing Cherokee children marching around with temperance banners singing the following lyrics to the tune of "Yankee Doodle":

*See us children full of glee*

*Marching with our banners*

*Drunkards we will never be;*

*Nor follow drunkards' manners*

Chorus: *Come and join us, one and all.*

*Hear our invitation;*

*Come and fight King Alcohol,*

*Drive him from the nation. (Holway 22)*

Apparently, Dr. Worcester had his work cut out for him. Although many of the Cherokees felt that alcohol was evil, just as many bought, sold and even made whiskey. As Littlefield explains,

It was not only the whites who trafficked in illegal whiskey. The possession or manufacture of whiskey in the Indian country was prohibited by law, yet the Cherokees in the vicinity of the posts, especially Fort Gibson, kept a supply on hand to sell to the troops. Many of the Cherokees were open in their talk against the prohibition laws, and from their position on the frontier of Arkansas, it was almost impossible for the army to stop the flow of whiskey into their country. (317)

With this much liquor floating around, it seems as if more music would be happening than just temperance songs, hymns, and classical music, but that information has proved difficult to uncover. Documenting the way in which musical instruments came into Indian Territory, fortunately, is a little easier.

The Worcester family turns out to be a means through which instruments came into Indian Territory. One son had a tenor viol sent from Boston, and soon thereafter a seraphine (a small, organ-like instrument popular in the mid 19th century) arrived (Garrett 342). Instruments came by other means as well to the prospering area: "Among the cargo freighted into the Indian Territory were pianos, music boxes, guitars, and mandolins. By boat, by ox-cart, from Kansas or Virginia or what other place of origin they came into the Territory to be cherished and preserved" (Garrett 345). Several of these instruments most likely found their way into African-American homes as well, although the thorough documentation of the frontier life of African-Americans has survived in a piecemeal fashion as opposed to that extant for Southeastern tribes and Anglo-Americans.

The assessments concerning the music of this period are quite thin. One article, Garrett's "Music on the Indian Territory Frontier," describes the music around mid-19th century Three Forks, although its decidedly focused on the "cultured" music of the area--who played which Beethoven sonata. The author lists a number of pianos that made their way into the territory, and describes the proliferation of organs after the Civil War, a result of the exhortations of traveling salesmen who could convince mixed-blood families and full bloods alike that no modern home should be without one (346-47). Garrett also notes the popularity of the fiddle, guitar, and mandolin in the Cherokee Nation, but makes no mention of individual songs played (347).

Along with his temperance songs, Dr. Worcester also printed hymnals at his Park Hill print shop, acknowledged as the first print shop in present-day Oklahoma ("Centenary" 252) and as further evidence of the area's urban connections since he would send his printed scripture sheets to New York for binding (Cherokee Almanac 1860). For all the temperance opposition, however, it was not easy to stop the flow of liquor to the rapidly growing territory. As the area became a more popular launching pad for the West, people were arriving regularly from all over the United States and Europe. Early territory newspapers give a flavor of the region by describing a captured whiskey boat that was



bound for Fort Gibson (Cherokee Advocate, 29: 3), and in 1848 report the Arkansas River was "in fine shape with several boats having landed in the past few days at Fort Gibson." The same paper also mentions in a separate column that "well-disposed blacks" should not be harassed while worshipping (Cherokee Advocate, 5 June: 1). This is further proof that African-Americans had opportunities in the Three Forks area unknown to most of them in Southern states. The fact that some African-Americans were "well-disposed" shows that by the middle of the 19th century, the African-American community around Three Forks was not only stable but economically healthy.

### **African-Americans**

Kaye Teall, author of Black History in Oklahoma: A Resource Book, instructs the public school readers of her text that African-Americans made their way into Oklahoma as part of Spanish exploring parties in the 16th century.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, African-Americans played an important role in the evolving state of Oklahoma, the first mass migrations coming with the removal of the five major Southeastern tribes: the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Seminole, and Muscogee (Creek). Arthur L. Tolson, author of The Black Oklahomans: A History, 1541-1972, also details the pre-slave history of immigrants of African descent in the Three Forks area. Tolson's work provides an important historical perspective on slavery in this area. He notes that "In 1831, the Creek census disclosed that there were 457 Black slaves among them in Georgia, while the Western Creeks who arrived in Indian Territory in 1817 owned 498 Blacks in 1835" (23). The interaction between the Muscogees and the African slaves was somewhat unique in the history of slavery in America. Not only did some of the Muscogee encourage their slaves to buy their freedom through servitude, but the tribe permitted intermarriage between former slaves and tribal members. Perhaps, only the Seminole have more inter-racial mixing between the two groups of people. The Seminole actually have bands especially for the African tribal members as part of their phratry system. As a result, the African

descendents' population in Indian Territory quickened. Jimmie Lewis Franklin notes in his history of African-Americans in Oklahoma, Journey Toward Hope, "Disagreement exists over the number of blacks who actually came to Oklahoma, but the 1860 census placed the figure at 7,369" (4). Numbers may never be accurate as a result of census takers confused about mixed-blood heritage, runaway slaves who hid from census takers, and tribal members who would not let their slaves come forward.

With the mixed-blood offspring of slaves and tribal members being fully accepted into by the Muscogee, "Creek slaves were accepted as equals by their masters socially and politically" (Tolson 24). However, Franklin cautions that "Indians . . . had taken black slaves with them without consideration [of the slaves'] wishes," however, "It is generally agreed that the Creeks and Seminoles displayed much more liberality in the treatment of their slaves" than did the other tribes (4). Even Henry Clay, a former slave, remembers, "It seems like the slaves in Creek country had a better time than most of the negroes in Louisiana, too. They played more and had their own churches and preachers" (Baker and Baker 83). More significance should be placed on the fact that many of the former slaves of the Creeks and their offspring formed the nucleus for the all-Black towns. Of particular importance for this study, they played a central role in the foundation of the strong African-American presence in the Muskogee area after the Civil War. By 1860, according to Tolson, "The Creeks had 1,651 Black slaves who were owned by 267 Indian slaveholders. Two of them had seventy-five Blacks each, while ten owned a total of 433" (25). With regard to the Cherokees, as of 1859 when there were 21,000 people living in the Cherokee Nation, 4,000 people of African descent (including slaves) were included in that number (Woodward 252).

With these notions in place, one can begin to assemble the lifestyle of slaves in the Three Forks area, based on both Anglo-sugar coatings and the aforementioned slave narratives. One tends to find romantic and melodramatic views, such as Bristow's in Tales of Old Fort Gibson: "Oh, those old, distant, rainy evenings at the stately Victorian

Ross Mansion! . . . the twang of banjos could be heard coming from the cabins of Negro slaves, Negroes who also had been brought over a long Trail of Tears from faraway Africa" (21). One might wince at these writings of a person who has never been subjected to slavery, but as noted before, even the slaves themselves do not paint a horrid picture. Although her reminiscences might have been softened over time, former slave Lucinda Vann seems to have fond memories of plantation life:

Everybody had a good time on old Jim Vann's plantation. After supper the colored folks would get together and talk, and sing, and dance. Someone maybe would be playing a fiddle or a banjo. Everybody was happy. Master never whipped no one . . . The slaves who worked in the big house was the first class. Next, came the carpenters, yard men, blacksmiths, race horse men, steamboat men and men like that. The low[est] class [of slaves] worked in the fields. (Baker and Baker 437)

Music was an important diversionary element of slave life, even if no instruments existed. Ex-slave James Southall remembers music on the plantation in the South before the Civil War: "We didn't have any music instruments so de music we danced by wasn't very good. Everybody sang and one or two would beat on tin pans or bones together" (Baker and Baker 407). After the war, music had its functional side for slaves. The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives has a number of entries in which music is mentioned, both sacred and secular. A number of stories tell of fiddlers. Ex-slave Henry Clay, who worked on the steamboats plying between the Red River and St. Louis, details the way he learned to play music as well as where and what he played: "On the boat I learned to fiddle, and I can make an old fiddle talk. So [I] done pretty good playing for the white dances for a long time after the War, and they sure had some good ones. Everything from a waltz to a Schottische I played" (Baker and Baker 84).

Another ex-slave, Martha Ann Ratliff remembers, "My father was a fiddler and some nights he would slip off to play for dances as well as for me . . . My master would give us a week for Christmas and the slaves would frolic and go to dances" (Baker and Baker

339). Even though some of the experiences may have been pleasant for the slaves, Franklin reminds us that "Bondage, however, was bondage," and "Historians face immense difficulty in generalizing about the nature of slavery in Indian Territory" (4). For an incredibly vivid picture into the life of the slaves, both those born in Indian Territory and those who moved here before or after the Civil War, The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives provides an important look into the institution of slavery as experienced by the slaves themselves. This volume is the "first to include all of the known WPA slave narratives contained in both the Washington and Oklahoma City collections" (Baker and Baker 12). Interestingly enough, thirty-nine of the interviews took place in Muskogee or in the rural vicinity, to include Fort Gibson and Gibson Station, the one-time terminus of the M, K, & T railroad discussed in the next chapter. Although the interviewees were usually quite old when asked rather generic questions by the WPA staff, we learn of the hardships of the time as well as the heroic way in which the slaves endured their servitude. A long essay could be written just on different elements of the slave lifestyle: i.e. punishment, foodways, religion, travel, marriages, and music. But, no matter what luster we place on slavery in the present-day, nothing can take away from the horrible concept of enslaving human beings. As ex-slave Lizzie Jackson remembers, "I'm glad the slave days is gone. Even if the master was good the slaves was bad off" (Baker 219).

Littlefield offers a detailed account of slavery within the Muscogee and also alludes to the way in which the two groups interacted spiritually and musically; he quotes an Army colonel's observations in 1842 of a private home church meeting: "Creeks, half-breeds, and negroes engaged in prayer and singing psalms" (141). The instance is an excellent example of the cross-culturization that was occurring at the time in Indian Territory. Littlefield summarizes the colonel's observations in this way: "[The colonel's] description is most revealing: the language and the music were those of the Creeks and the whites, and the lyrics that he heard were apparently those of the old slave spiritual" (141). Although a tantalizing clue to the previously mentioned inter-related musical influences

that have yet to be fully explored between the Africans and the Muscogee, the scene is exactly what Carney proposes allowed for the development of jazz in Oklahoma:

Within this cultural mosaic, music knew no color. Black, white, and red musicians borrowed freely from each other, exchanging repertoires and musical ideas and adopting new techniques and styles. These cross-cultural experiences favored the development of Oklahoma jazz. ("Oklahoma Jazz" 17)

Certainly with the diversity of slaves described earlier by Linda Vann who had come from the South in the first place, the same culture hearth components were in place to foster the development first of blues and then jazz as they developed in other areas of the South. As already determined, whether directly influenced by the Muscogee or not, hymn and spiritual singing was in place at private and public church meetings as a result of the slaves' relative freedom to move about under Muscogee servitude, and certainly the field hollers and work songs that also form the basis for blues existed on the various farms and plantations in the Three Forks area. However, life for all area residents would change as Fort Gibson faded as an important military post; the oncoming Civil War would change the domestic situation of slave and slave holder alike.

### **The Cold Water Army and Fort Gibson's Demise**

The Cold Water Army was a temperance society in Tahlequah that had a large effect on the area. Meetings were held all over the Indian Nation because of the ease of access to the area for Arkansas and Missouri whiskey peddlers. Mass meetings were also held at Tahlequah to protest the continuance of Fort Gibson because "the region around the post was found to be a hotbed of vice and a rendezvous of whiskey peddlers" (Woodward 250). Such an environment must have been good for fiddle string vendors; nevertheless, the Cherokees' protests were heard and in 1857 the post was closed and returned to the Cherokees in accordance with treaty provisions (Boydston 178). Certainly the town suffered as noted by a traveler who was making his way to California in 1858: "The town

of the Fort, seems to have been quite a business at one time, but it now looks rather deserted since the soldiers have left; being nothing more than a trading post for the Indians" ("Journey" 108). "Although the relinquishment of Fort Gibson to the Cherokees seemed to portend the demise of the post," Faulk writes, "its abandonment was short-lived" (Early 34). The "White Man's War" was just around the corner and soon the fort would be occupied by both Confederate forces (1861) and Union troops (1862-63) (Early 34). To follow would be the Battle of Honey Springs, where African-American troops would fight for the first time in Union uniforms alongside whites and American Indians, many of whom would settle in the area. After the Civil War, however, Muskogee takes over the title of cultural center for Three Forks, as the arrival of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas railroad in 1872 insured Muskogee would outgrow both Fort Gibson and Tahlequah.

The factors that played the biggest parts in the early cultural development of Three Forks are the three rivers themselves and their confluence, the multi-cultural trading posts and their link to New Orleans, the development of Fort Gibson and its proximity to both Three Forks and the Texas Road, the arrival of the Muscogee and Cherokees with their slaves and respective cultures, and the development of Tahlequah. In the next chapter, music will be discussed within the context of the area's major historical moments: the Civil War and the founding of Muskogee. The the city's subsequent rise as a center for commerce in the region led to its importance as a center for African-American independence and enterprise.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough explanation of Muscogee stomp dance and ceremonial music, see Speck's "Ceremonial."

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive survey of American Indian melodic influences in 19th and 20th century music see Pisani.

CHAPTER THREE  
AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND MUSIC  
AT THREE FORKS, INDIAN TERRITORY,  
AND MUSKOGEE, OKLAHOMA

1861-1907

The most significant events for African-Americans in the period between 1861 and 1907 were the Civil War and its aftermath which award freedmen land and tribal status, the founding of Muskogee as a terminus for the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas railroad in 1872, the evolution of Muskogee's African-American economy to include the commercial district on South Second Street and other business enterprises in Muskogee, and the subsequent recruiting of Southern African-Americans to the Muskogee area's all-Black towns of Indian Territory.

**The Civil War and Its Aftermath**

As Laurence Hauptman writes, "the Civil War . . . proved to be the final nail in the coffin in Indian efforts to stop the tide of American expansion" (x). The notion of somehow stemming the continued loss of tribal members' lives, begun forty years prior in the East, appealed especially to the full-blood Muscogees who maintained slaves and ties to the old South. As a result, the Muscogees split their allegiances between the North and the South, and, subsequently, after the war the entire tribe was punished by being forced to give up both land and slaves. However, not only were the slaves to be freed, they were to be incorporated as full members into the tribe with full allotment privileges of land and money. Although the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee nations were less than wholeheartedly compliant with these post-war provisions, the Muscogees fulfilled these obligations, creating a landed, monetarily stable African-American population which was the foundation for the future development of the Three Forks area. As Littlefield explains,



"From the revolutionary war until the outbreak of the Civil War, the blacks had played an important role in Creek Affairs" (233). As slaves often spoke both the Muscogee language and English, slaves often served as interpreters and negotiators for the Creeks, which again substantiates the slaves' important position within Muscogee society compared to slaves of non-Indians.

None of this implies African-Americans had it easy during or after the Civil War. As a matter of fact, as Mary Jane Warde points out, slaves may have had the most difficult situation during the war:

While the white residents, missionaries, and Indian citizens of the territory had some control over their fate, Indian Territory blacks had none. New laws threatened to force free blacks back into slavery in the Creek Nation. Some Indian slaveowners sold their slaves at the beginning of the war for portable cash. Many more took valuable male slaves south, leaving the mothers, wives and children of these men behind the potential danger zone. (68)

Warde also mentions "free blacks" and it is important to remember that some freedmen already lived in the Three Forks area, having worked or purchased their way out of bondage from the Muscogees who encouraged such action.

During the war some slaves allied themselves with Muscogee leader Opothle Yahola who was loyal to the Union side of the war. Slaves overlooked the fact that Yahola and many of his followers were slaveholders, and supported this Muscogee faction. Many dominant members of the Muscogee (Creek) government, now allied with the Confederates, were enemies of Yahola and set out to attack him and his forces, some 7,000 strong (Warde 68-9). As word of the approaching Confederate forces reached the Yahola camp, many people dispersed while those who remained to fight sustained heavy losses. When Yahola's group straggled into Kansas to relative safety, their agent noted about them, "Families who in their country had been wealthy, and who could count their cattle by the thousands and horses by hundreds, and owned large numbers of slaves were

without even the necessities of life" (qtd. in Warde 70). The agent's comments again attest to the positive situation as it existed for Muscogees and their slaves prior to the war in Indian Territory.

As the war progressed and federal forces reoccupied Fort Gibson in the spring of 1863, agitators were sent among the Cherokees' slaves to "induce them to run away to Fort Gibson where able-bodied 'freedmen' were being inducted into the Union army" (Warde 75). This was not the only significant involvement of African-Americans in the war effort. Sometimes referred to as the "Gettysburg of the West," the battle of Honey Springs pitted tribal members against each other and saw African-Americans fighting in Union uniforms for one of the first time in the war. Of the troops fighting for the North, three regiments of Indian Home Guards, to include Seminoles, Creeks, and others, battled alongside the First Kansas Infantry (colored) as well as other Northern Anglo troops (Morris, Goins, and McReynolds 30). Understanding this history helps in grasping the pride African-Americans had in this area when confronted by the racist Oklahoma government of 1907. Essentially, they felt they had fought for and settled the area.<sup>1</sup>

The Battle of Honey Springs not only turned back the Confederate advance north in Indian Territory, but the battle had significance for all slaves in the area. As Warde explains, "The Battle of Honey Springs also changed the circumstances of slaves in the Cherokee and Creek nations. Some fleeing masters took their slaves with them into exile, but federal troops rounded up other slaves and delivered them to Fort Gibson and freedom (76). Although the refugee camp at Fort Gibson was practically destitute, the thinly guarded camp represented the beginnings of freedom in the area, and indeed after the war the fort would become a payment stations for freedmen, thus further establishing a class of African-American people with money who could invest in their future and establish their base in the area's economy.

The future for the Muscogees would forever be scarred by the war as they suffered a twenty-four percent decline in population. The Muscogee lost not only people; all they

had worked for between removal and the war settled into the dust and ash of ruins. As Warde illustrates, "Returning citizens found once-cultivated fields grown up in brush, fences down, and homeplaces burned . . . The bones of the dead littered old battlefields. The once abundant livestock of the Indian Territory had also disappeared" (84). Moreover, Reconstruction treaties divested the Muscogees of half their land and the "treaties granted two right-of-ways across the territory to railroad corporations," clearing the path for the organized development for Indian Territory and Muskogee (Warde 84). Littlefield details the events leading up to the Treaty of 1866, and, the ramifications of it for African-Americans by quoting from Article 2 of the treaty:

And inasmuch as there are among the Creeks many persons of African descent, who have no interest in the soil, it is stipulated that hereafter these persons lawfully residing in said Creek country under their laws and usages . . . may return within one year from the ratification of this treaty, and their descendants and such others of the same race as may be permitted by the laws of the said nation to settle within the limits of the jurisdiction of the Creek Nation as citizens, shall have and enjoy all the rights and privileges of native citizens, including an equal interest in the soil and national funds, and the laws of the said nation shall be equally binding upon and give equal protection to all such persons, and all others of whatever race or color, who may be adopted as citizens or members of said tribe. (248)

The Civil War in Indian Territory was devastating to the tribes, slaves, settlers, and missionaries who were living there when the war broke out. None benefited as widely as the African-Americans who were freed and/or incorporated into the Muscogee Creek Nation following the war. Littlefield also tells of General John Sanborn who was sent to Indian Territory to see how the relations between the freedmen and their former masters was going. Sanborn found the freedmen "the most industrious, economical, and, in many respects, the more intelligent" segment of the population (Littlefield 246). Sanborn went on to theorize that the former slaves would do very well for themselves, since they had

many ox teams, and "among their numbers were blacksmiths, carpenters, and wheelwrights. [Sanborn] found that the Creeks looked upon the freedmen as their equals in rights and were in favor of incorporating them into their tribe with all the rights and privileges of native Indians" (qtd. in Littlefield 246). In fact, Muscogee chiefs were very conscientious about the education of freedmen: "Following the abolition of slavery and the signing of treaties with the Indians, the leaders of the tribes established schools for blacks" (Franklin, Journey 26). I would argue that nowhere in the United States were the former slaves better situated than in the post-war Muscogee Creek Nation, which served as the foundation for the African-American development of the area in the latter half of the 19th and early decades of the 20th centuries. Colonel William Penn Adair, a respected Cherokee, said as much when he addressed the 1878 Indian International Fair in Muskogee:

As regards the matter of slavery [the Five Tribes] have since the late war of the rebellion proved themselves to be more civilized than the people of the United States because, owning as they did at the beginning of the war some 20,000 slaves, they, by their treaty of 1866, voluntarily emancipated their slaves and made them a part of their citizen population with an interest in their lands and public funds, especially the school funds, which is far more than the government of the United States has done for the slaves of its citizens. (260-61)

As for music in the area during this period, one photograph stands out in Teall's Black History in Oklahoma which indicates the area was musically active (141). The photograph is of a dance at the freedmen's camp at Fort Gibson while the participants wait for enrollment. No instruments can be seen in the photograph, but the swirling skirt of one of the women dancers and the smiling faces of many of the African-American men in the photo are testaments to the place of music in their society and forebode good times

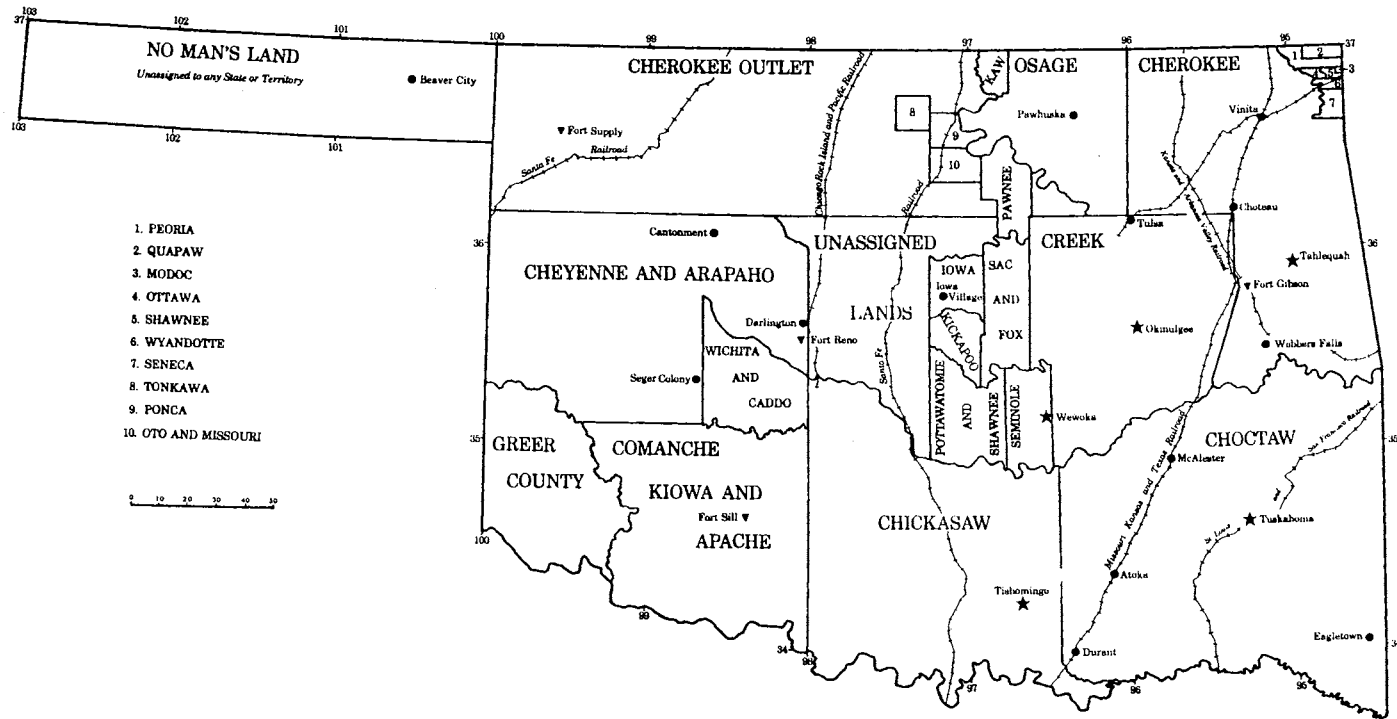


Fig. 8. Indian Territory (1866-1889), map 33 from John W. Morris, et. al., *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

to come in the city of Muskogee, its surrounding all-Black towns, and the music that would come from it

### **The Founding of Muskogee**

As a result of the Treaties of 1866, railroad entrepreneurs eagerly traversed the Indian Territory. The Missouri, Kansas, and Texas line (alternately known as the M, K, & T, or the KATY) was the first to begin laying its tracks. As Odie Faulk notes in his history of early Muskogee, "At first railroad officials planned to run an extension from Gibson Station . . . to [Fort Gibson] and then on to Fort Smith, Arkansas. However, the Cherokees stubbornly resisted the move, and the planned route was abandoned" (Muskogee 46). Gibson Station remained the terminus until a bridge could be built across the Arkansas River. In The KATY Railroad and the Last Frontier, V. V. Masterson paints a colorful portrait of Gibson Station's new-found permanence: "It began to grow and flourish, wildly. Great, tented gambling hells went up, big enough to hold most of the riffraff in the territory-which they did" (135). After six months of bridge building and concern on the part of Katy managers about the "drunkards, robbers, terminus men and gamblers who had collected at the end of the track," the first Katy engine made its way across the 840-foot bridge spanning the Arkansas (Masterson 135). Rails were laid a short distance, "and on New Year's Day of 1872 a station called Muscogee (as the name would be spelled until 1900) was established" (West, Muskogee 46). The station was not permanent, however, as "A few weeks later the Katy chose to relocate at the present site of Muskogee because of the uneven character of the ground where the station was first built" (Faulk, Muskogee 48). A town was not supposed to come with the railroad. As Masterson points out, the Treaty of 1866 guaranteed right of way for the tracks, but the construction of anything else was prohibited. Masterson relays the story of the Creek Nation agent posting an order "forbidding anyone to raise, construct, or build any tent, house, cabin, or other building, or to reside or do business along the line of the railroad"

(144). Not much attention was paid to the edict. The morning after the locating agent had driven the stakes for the railroad's depot "several tents and board shacks [were] up and ready for business" (Masterson 144). The sovereignty of the Creek Nation or the freedmen meant nothing to the crowd following the railroad, many of whom were the "terminus types," bringing their lifestyle into the area that would become downtown Muskogee. Muskogee could be considered a prototypical, if not stereotypical, western railroad town of the 19th century, brimming with illegal whiskey, outlaws, "Indians," carpetbaggers and the forward momentum of the railroad industry, if it were not for the atypical presence of free, and for the most part, educated African-Americans, who were the primary population of the settlement at this time. The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma reports that the population was "predominantly Negro - Creek freedmen who had chosen the neighborhood as especially suited to their agricultural needs and knowledge" (149). Once the town was built, population slowly followed, but without the laws of the United States governing the Indian Territory, Muskogee continued as a rough and tumble railroad town with a mix of Cherokees and Muscogees, African-Americans, and Anglo traders, railroad builders, and outlaws scuffling through its streets. The city was considered one of the lawless railroad towns where "offscourings of the earth" gathered around the stations (Miner 55). The WPA Guide relates the story of a Creek lighthorseman (police officer) who would not get involved in the rowdiness in Muskogee: "since it was a purely Negro town he could not appropriately assign any of his men to the task" (150). One settler who moved to the town in 1882 said it had just five white families when he arrived (Faulk, Muskogee 82).

Masterson considers Muskogee unique as a frontier railroad town. He notes that other terminus towns settled down once the railroad moved on, but "Muskogee alone remained rip-roaring and lawless for twenty years or more" (146). One thinks of the 19th century writer Stephen Crane and the settings of his stories "The Blue Hotel" and "A Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." If the railroad were not enough to cement Muskogee's permanence on

the map with the completion of the M, K, & T line to Texas, the establishment of the Union Agency for the Five Civilized Tribes in 1876 made the town's significance firm. Masterson explains, "The choice of Muskogee as headquarters for these land wealthy Indian tribes was probably the decisive factor in Muskogee's survival" (147).

Throughout the next decade, Muskogee expanded through the building of mills, churches, and several businesses of the trade variety and a school which educated children of all races. As J.M. Gaskins writes, "The Baptist mission board opened a mission school in 1876. It served Indians, Blacks, and Caucasians" (550). The newspaper of record, The Indian Journal, was printed in both Muscogee Creek and English. The city was quickly becoming an important city in the Southwest, both for travel and trade. The arrival of the railroad, however, slowed riverboat traffic between Three Forks and New Orleans which only one year before brought the world to Three Forks. John Benedict details the riverboat traffic in his book about Muskogee and northeastern Oklahoma: "About the year 1870, twenty steamboats were plying the rivers between Fort Gibson and New Orleans. . . . In those days it was thought nothing unusual to load cargoes of freight on boats at New York, Cincinnati or St. Louis destined for Fort Gibson" (477-78).

Cosmopolitan as that sounds, little romance can be attached to the town with 600 people that was little more than "mud puddles, straying animals, no sidewalks, [and] no paved streets" as of 1883 (Faulk, Muskogee 52). However, what Muskogee's children had was the opportunity for education: "[In 1884]Evangel Mission offered excellent facilities for freedman and the Old Tullahassee Mission under the direction of the American Baptist Board also was giving education opportunities to many Negro children and it could not be said that the Negros were being neglected educationally" (West, Muskogee 21). West also notes music had its place in Muskogee at the time: "Mrs. Narcissa Owen . . . wrote a letter to the editor of the Indian Journal offering prizes of five dollar gold pieces to young people excelling in music to be awarded at the International Indian Fair in October" (Muskogee 51).



Muskogee's geographic location and the fact of its railroad already being in place made Muskogee an important shipping point for cattle that could be driven up the Texas Road to the holding pens in Muskogee, where the beef could then be loaded onto trains for trips north to Kansas. Thus, ranching was an early mainstay of the county's economy (Faulk, Muskogee 55). Even when a fire in 1887 swept through the city's business district, resiliency remained. As Faulk observed, homeowners and business people could build back better (Muskogee 55). This rebuilding allowed a new respectability which contributed to the city's landing a federal court in 1889, which, in turn, furthered the security for non-Indians who came into the territory, and, subsequently made rowdiness a sport. As Foreman notes of the year 1892, "A spirit of unrestrained license has descended upon Muskogee; beer and liquors have been shipped in and sold on all sides; drunken men by the score are seen on the streets by day and by night, making the city hideous by their carousing, fighting, shooting, and whooping" (Muskogee 161).

Musically, in 1890 a brass band was organized, placing Muskogee alongside most significant American cities and towns with brass bands to play at civic events, during parades, and at seasonal concerts (West, Muskogee 43). Of course, one of the elements that leads to the evolution of both ragtime and jazz is the brass band movement of the late 19th century popularized by John Phillip Sousa. Muskogee was no exception. By 1894, Muskogee featured the Turner Opera House, which West claims "put Muskogee on the same levels with cities of the East culturally, for it was just the beginning of many more such institutions and the attempt to have theatrical and musical performances that would be the envy of anyone" (Muskogee 46). West explains that the Turner Opera House, itself a product of Muskogee's "highbrow" period was the forerunner of several other theaters, such as the Hyde Park Theatre, the Wigwam Theatres, Convention Hall, the Ritz, the Broadway, the Lyric, and Bijou Theatre (Muskogee 47). West does not delve into the theatres, dance halls, and Grand Hall that existed on South Second Street for African-Americans to attend their own national caliber shows, but this study will explore them in

the next chapter. West does say that "all the largest orchestras and bands" graced Muskogee's stages, but does not say when, and that "Various road shows appeared regularly," although he does not say which ones (Muskogee 47). West also notes that local schools such as Indian University, Harrell Institute, and Kendall College "appeared often in the various theatres" (Muskogee 47). West's texts are good reference points for Muskogee historians; however, much of his material comes out of newspapers publicly available, and so his books on Muskogee and Fort Gibson tend to be based on his opinion of what might be interesting historically from a given day's newspaper. I would argue that his primary focus is on the Anglo culture of Muskogee, and he gives only the most obvious information on the city's African-American history. Nonetheless, Muskogee did grow rapidly in these years. The WPA Guide reports the population of Muskogee increased from 2,500 to 4,254 between 1889 and 1900. The WPA Guide goes on to note that "because of oil development, the number of inhabitants nearly tripled" (151).

### **Indian Territory's Black Towns and "The Black Tiger"**

Alongside the growth of Muskogee as a town were many smaller settlements of freedmen nearby which evolved into the all-Black towns of the twin territories. These settlements grew out of the original allotments of lands from the Muscogees to the freedmen as a result of the previously mentioned Treaty of 1866. As Faulk explains, "Wherever possible the blacks tended to cluster their allotments together, and thus within the Indian Territory there were many all-black towns" (Muskogee 63). This settlement pattern created a relatively large population of African-Americans already landed in Indian Territory, and on the basis of this foundation others began to contemplate leaving their increasingly inhospitable Southern homes. Teall quotes the Topeka Daily Capitol of October, 1889 as reporting,

No less than 12,000 [Blacks] are about to leave Georgia for Oklahoma. Thousands more are turning in the same direction from every section in the South. It is not

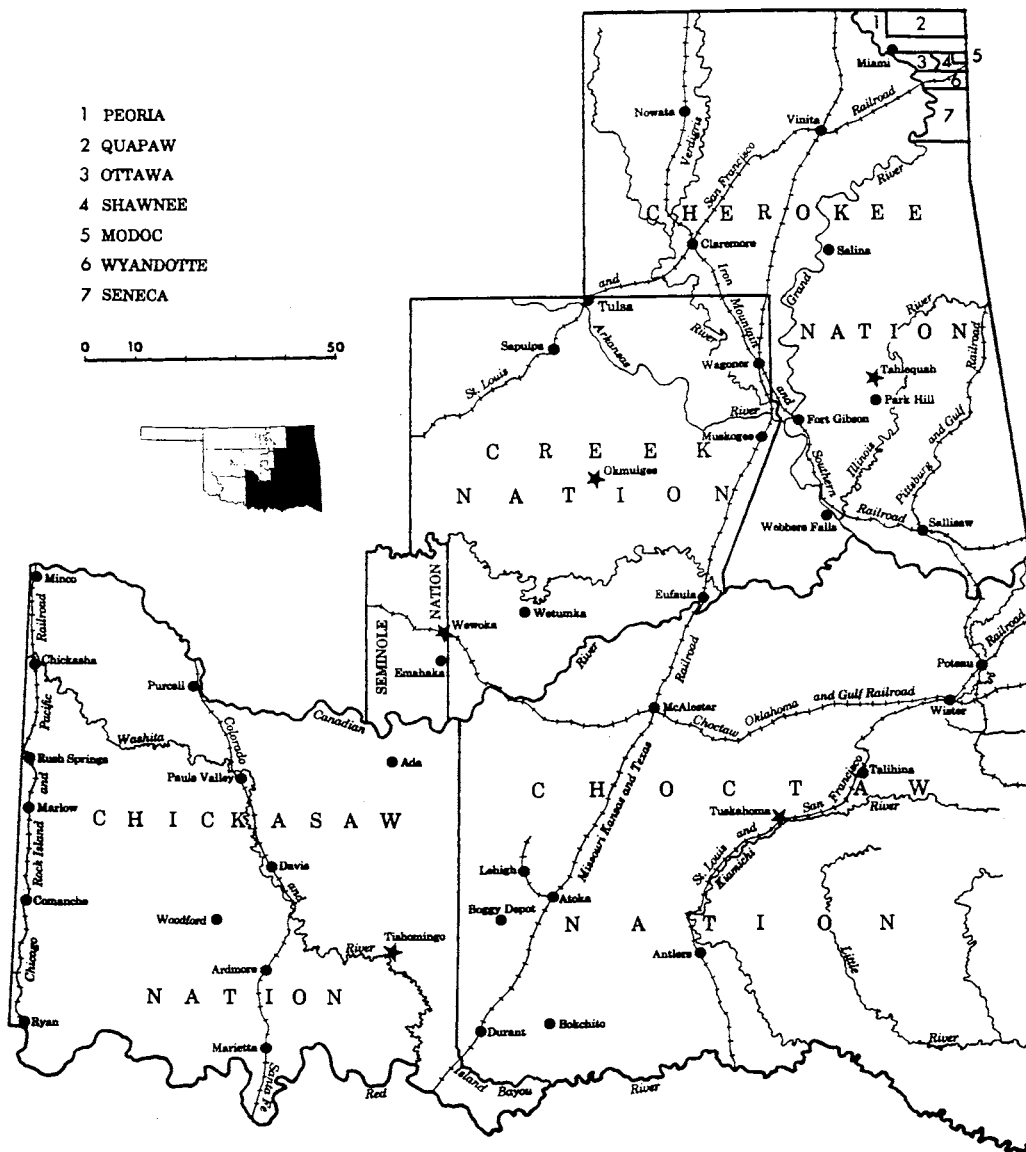


Fig. 9. Indian Territory (1889), map 52 from John W. Morris, et. al., Historical Atlas of Oklahoma (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

impossible that the new territory will be largely colonized by the negroes, who will make for themselves an opportunity to show the world what their capacity for self-government is. (151)

As the oral histories of the jazz musicians in later chapters of this study show, some of their ancestors did come from the South in this time period. As Linda Gray explains in her essay about Taft, one of the all-black towns near Muskogee,

the [population] growth was overwhelmingly the result of black migration from the Old South. After the Civil War, the South experienced chaotic social upheaval. Blacks and whites who left the South had much in common. Each group had faith in a frontier where free land and opportunities abounded - a Utopian society. Finally, both groups, racially intolerant of each other, believed separation of the races to be absolutely essential. When large numbers of each group migrated to the Twin Territories, racially segregated communities developed. (431)

In 1894, the Dawes Commission, created to allot tribal lands to individual tribal members and distribute the rest for outsider settlement, established a headquarters in Muskogee, and the town grew rapidly. As *The WPA Guide* explains, "As soon as it became possible to secure titles to land in the Indian Territory, so many white men flocked in that the supremacy of the Indians was seriously threatened" (151), not to mention that of the freemen. Jimmie Lewis Franklin notes that in Wagoner, only fourteen miles north of Muskogee and where Jay McShann played his first gig with fellow Muskogeean Don Byas, "blacks owned a cotton gin, a saloon, boarding houses, and a variety of other businesses" (*Journey* 24). Gray reports that by 1900 more than 50,000 Blacks had migrated to the area (431). In the decade before 1900, Muskogee became, perhaps, the most important black community in Indian Territory, if not the United States. Historian Nudie Williams calls Muskogee the "capital city of black newspapers. Four African-American newspapers were published there before 1900: the *Muskogee Sun* (1893); the *Pioneer* (1898); the *Muskogee Cimiter* (1899); and the *Baptist College Searchlight*

# All Black Towns of Oklahoma

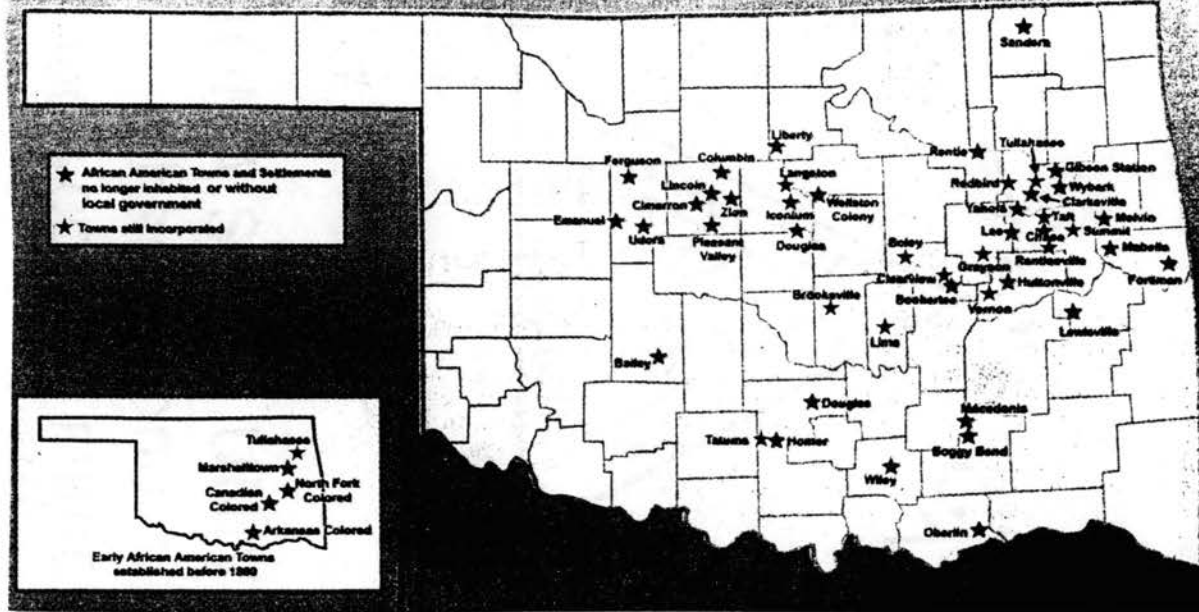


Fig. 10. All-Black Towns of Oklahoma, map courtesy of Oklahoma Historical Society, rpt. in "Lost Towns No More." *Stillwater News Press* 18 Mar. 2000, A1.

(1899)" (316). The press had a tremendous amount of influence on the area Williams explains that with "the agitation of the press and the increasing population, blacks were able to exert political influence" (317). In turn, Williams notes, that political influence was wielded by both the community and its media:

The black newspapers did such a thorough job of mobilizing the black vote into a Republican voting bloc that even in the larger urban areas such as Guthrie and Muskogee, the Republican Party was dependent on blacks and was forced to concede blacks a place on the party's ticket. (317)

The resulting backlash against the state's Republican party derived from its association with African-Americans (Williams 317).

An Indian Territory newspaper of particular importance was the Muskogee Cimiter, whose editor W.H. Twine (WHT), was known as "The Black Tiger." The paper played an important activist role in the area's black consciousness immediately before and after statehood; it also aided in the recruitment of blacks to Indian Territory. Linda Twine, Muskogee-born in 1947, and a well regarded conductor of musicals in her own right in the late 20th century, talks about her relative W. H. Twine in a family history published for a Twine reunion in 1987. She explains that "WHT's" father, Thomas John Twine, was the "earliest known Oklahoma ancestor . . . [who] was a runaway slave from Virginia, a wheelwright and described as a full-blooded Indian" (Family 1). Of the building at South Second Street which housed The Cimiter, as well as doctors offices, the Sango real estate business, and a tailor shop, Twine says, "[His] two story brick building was erected in 1909. Except for the white contractor, the entire construction crew was black, an unheard of thing in those days" (Family 34).

Twine notes the trip "WHT" led to Washington to protest the ratification of statehood for fear of what it would do to the territories' blacks, she also explains how he came to be known as "The Black Tiger" throughout Oklahoma. The title resulted from WHT's prevention of lynchings on "several occasions in Muskogee by mobilizing small armies of

Negroes equipped with high-powered rifles" (Family 34). As Twine notes, "WHT" loved Muskogee and "was keenly interested in its progress" (Family 34). She also mirrors the sentiment expressed throughout this work that Muskogee had significant role models for its African-American citizens. Twine says, "His acts of heroism and humanitarian deeds . . . made him a paternal symbol, not only for the family, but for all Oklahoma blacks" (Family 34). Linda Twine explains the origin of "The Black Tiger" nickname, quoting Dr. Robert Taylor: "Roscoe Dunjee, editor of The Black Dispatch was the first to call Lawyer Twine 'The Black Tiger' because he was a tiger when it came to fighting the Negro causes and battles. I remember he headlined his paper, 'The Black Tiger Speaks'" (Family 39). Twine's paper, the Muskogee Cimiter, was his and his alone as he "was the sole editor and publisher of the paper for about 25 years" (Family 42). Franklin can not overemphasize the importance of the black newspapers in maintaining "black pride and identity" (Family 59). As already discussed earlier, Franklin indicates, "The press also helped to mold positive images of strong black people within the community . . . and they favorably affected the lives of the young people who came into contact with them" (Family 59).

With his paper as a calling card, flier, and informational resource, W. H Twine was also a significant recruiter of African-Americans to Indian Territory, promising opportunity and freedom for a peaceful life in good circumstances. The idea sounded good to African-Americans all across the South, as white farmers were increasingly resentful of their cheap labor population leaving the farms and plantations. Compile that resentment with even older prejudices, and Indian Territory must have looked like a paradise compared to the South. Gray relates the positive possibilities for the all-black towns and communities where black businesses thrived:

Citizens could avoid, at least for a time, the daily encounters with whites and the humiliating confrontations that came from second class citizenship. They enjoyed a sense of accomplishment as contributors to their own communities where they had the opportunity to succeed at tasks closed to them in white communities. (435)

Carney explains how black "boosters" were successful in attracting new settlers to the area: "Promotional literature described the region as an area where blacks could obtain free land, exercise their rights as citizens, and escape racial discrimination" ("Historic" 117). A facsimile of "booster" literature is kept in the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma Library in Norman.<sup>2</sup> The pamphlet is titled RED BIRD, Creek Nation, I.T., and subtitled An Opportunity for the Colored Man. Inside the pamphlet is "A Message to the Colored Man:"

Do you want a home in the Great Southwest-The Beautiful Indian Territory?

In a town populated by intelligent, self-reliant colored people, where all lines of business, professions and your local government will be in your own hands; where your chance for development and growth, financially, politically, socially and intellectually will be limited only by your own ability?

If so, read this pamphlet and consider this proposition. Read the letters from prominent members of your race in this part of the country. They are acquainted with the country and capable of advising you. (1)

The advisors are the elite of Muskogee's African-American businessmen. J.M. Davis, physician and surgeon, writes, "The opportunities for the colored man here are better than any place I know and, in fact, this country is the Paradise for the colored man." W.H. Twine, the newspaper man and attorney-at-law, testifies that "the country surrounding Red Bird is one of the most productive localities in the Indian Territory. The soil is rich and equal to the finest lands in the Mississippi delta. . . . The town . . . is almost exclusively settled by colored people." Lawyer A. E. Patterson explains that "Opportunities offered here that are withheld from colored people in other sections of the United States, and the greatest of these is the opportunity to easily acquire a comfortable fortune without working a lifetime to get it" (Red Bird 36) Patterson goes on to express the urgency of the situation: "The opportunities . . . are become less numerous, because the white people are not slow in seeing the greatness of this country and are rapidly being



assimilated" (Red Bird 36). The pamphlet closes by letting the reader know that the investment in Red Bird is "open to the colored man only," and that the town is "located on the M, K, & T railroad, twenty-one miles northwest of Muskogee." The connection to Muskogee mattered because of the city's significance to African-Americans in Indian Territory. With regards to Muskogee, Carney notes, "Many of the all-black towns in Indian Territory were founded near Muskogee shortly after the turn of the [20th] century" (Historic 119). Carney tallies twenty-four all-Black towns in Indian Territory. He explains the population continued growing, "Because a majority of blacks lived [there]," with the remaining four towns and one colony founded in Oklahoma Territory (Historic 119). In fact, Tullahassee, located in Wagoner County near the Verdigris River, is considered the oldest known all-Black town in Indian Territory, dating back to 1850 when the Muscogees built a school there. Tolson explains that in December, 1880, "the Tullahassee school was destroyed by fire. The Chief called a convention and it was decided to locate the new building in an Indian neighborhood and turn what remained of the old plant over to the freedmen" (97).

Although optimists do like to hold up these all-Black towns as paradigms of African-American self-reliance and determination, Tolson reminds us "they offered no permanent solution for the Black question. Rather, they served as temporary expedients for relieving racial tensions in a bi-racial society during the territorial era" (104). In addition, Julian Borger asks noted historian John Hope Franklin about the failure of Rentiesville, one of the state's all-Black towns where Franklin was born and spent part of his childhood. Franklin explains his father's newspaper and trading company failed due to lack of community support, which "persuaded my father and mother that this so-called utopia, this bastion of racial unity, this Eden where all were supposed to be sisters and brothers, was a travesty of all it supposedly stood for" (Borger 2:1). At the same time the all-Black towns were springing up in the "Black Utopia," both oil and hatred of African-Americans were bubbling under the surface of Indian Territory's society. As Tolson notes, "although

Oklahoma was looked upon as a 'Negro Mecca' to Blacks escaping the racism of the Southland, it appeared that Southern whites had entered the territory and were introducing racial hate into the new land" (130). Other reasons for the all-Black towns' growth reversal included "the cost and hardships of moving, family ties to home, fear of the unknown, and an unfamiliar agricultural environment" (Carney Historic 118). Since many of the towns relied on agricultural production, when farms began to fail no help came to them. Franklin emphasizes, "The only farm subsidies provided by the federal government were administered by whites and were not shared by black farmers. Black farms were foreclosed in large numbers" (qtd. in Borger 2:1). Racism played as much a part of the townships' failure as anything. As Franklin notes, "You can run but you can't hide" (qtd. in Borger 2:1). Muskogee's African-American leaders, led by lawyer and newspaperman W. H. Twine, did not run away and certainly did not hide. The work they did laid the foundation for the 20th century' African-American civil rights movement in Oklahoma and in the United States.

### **Boomtown, Statehood, the Black Tiger, and Music**

For a soundtrack to the early 20th century in Muskogee, one needs to go no further than the titans of piano in the pre-history and early period of jazz.<sup>4</sup> Scott Joplin's ragtime filled the air, whether he or someone or something else was playing it. The music's growth mirrored the surge in United States piano production from 1890 to 1909 as people moving west wanted to dress up their parlors, or just enjoy making music (Gioa, History 22). The development of mechanical player pianos also furthered the popularity of ragtime, as one could enjoy the complicated, syncopated music without having to be able to play it, a harbinger for years to come in which musicians would be increasingly replaced with machines and computer technology. The Cimiter proves Muskogee was no different in the country's piano trend with an August 10, 1905 advertisement:

PIANOS, PIANOS! PIANOS!

Our plan of piano selling will save you money. We have no sub-agents or commission men to pay, we get all the discounts. We take your second hand organ or piano in exchange. We have the largest stock in the city to select from. Our small payment plan makes piano buying easy. Remember the place - Old Reliable BOLLINGER MUSIC HOUSE. (1)

Music must have been flowing throughout the city's sporting district and homes, and some of that music was the precursor to jazz. Although Gioa does not mention Muskogee, he depicts Jelly Roll Morton, "the greatest of the New Orleans jazz composers," traveling through St. Louis, Tulsa, Houston "and other locales" (History 39-40). The railroad connected these places, and certainly Morton would have had to go through Muskogee. If nothing else he probably would have known the black sporting and business district was one block away in the case of the M, K & T. One could have seen it from the window of a train pulling into the Midland Valley Depot. Muskogee would be a very inviting atmosphere for a young Morton honing his skills as both an itinerant pianist and "pool shark" (Gioa History 40). Muskogee's bustling atmosphere of trains, wagons, horses, rainbow of people, building, trading, and money must have been exciting and full of promise.

Faulk explains, "By 1902 Muskogee was in a boom period" (Muskogee 74). City sewage and waterworks, long a criticism of the town's urbanity, were under construction, new railroads were being discussed, and an influx of settlers burgeoned the already teeming population. By 1903, Muskogee had six banks, three cotton gins, a brick plant, a concrete block plant, wholesale houses, 200 business establishments, electricity, and long-distance telephone service, and it needed to build new schools (Faulk, Muskogee 78). West indicates 585 white children and 261 black children lived in the city at the time (Muskogee 79). West goes on to explain that Muskogee "boasted of 10,000 inhabitants . . . six railroads with fourteen passenger trains and twenty-four freight trains daily . . . an opera house, Federal Court, Dawes Commission, Federal Prison . . . and building stone,

oil and gas (Muskogee 89-90). Faulk details the discovery of oil: ". . . on December 3 a well was completed on the edge of town. A gusher, it sprayed oil across nearby houses. To process the crude . . . a refinery was completed in Muskogee in 1904, the first in what would come to be Oklahoma (Muskogee 78). The boom was not relegated to whites. Grant Foreman, in Muskogee: The Biography of an Oklahoma Town, notes that African-Americans not only prospered but added to the economy when laws changed:

When the restrictions were removed in 1904, and the Negroes could sell and mortgage their land, money flowed like water in Muskogee, and it was difficult to keep sufficient merchandise in stock. The Negro women were partial to bright-colored petticoats of rustling taffeta. Boxes of skirts and shirtwaists were sold out before they could be marked and put in stock. (126)

Foreman points out that the finest silks and trimmings for dresses were purchased from the St. Louis, Chicago, and New York markets, and all the fineries of elegant, urbane homes could be found in Muskogee, even if, "guests found it necessary to plow through bottomless mud in the streets" to visit other people's homes (Muskogee 126-7). As a result of its "cosmopolitan" status, Foreman recounts that "road shows both good and bad exhibited in this area" (Muskogee 144). These shows also explain in part why Muskogee's music scene evolved in the early decades of the 20th century:

Muskogee was fortunately situated to provide a break in travel from Kansas City to Dallas; thus many excellent companies featuring celebrated actors and musicians performing in those cities, often included Muskogee in their bookings, and showed to appreciative audiences there. (Foreman, Muskogee 144)

Traveling shows provided entertainment for the audiences and employment opportunities for Muskogee's musicians. Claude Williams remembers the first group he joined that was traveling through Muskogee: "This cat was named Kid Thomas and His Jazz Babies. He had about three girls dancing in a chorus line. We jumped from Muskogee to Hot

Springs, and then from Hot Springs we played all up and down Arkansas, Little Rock, Baxter, and a bunch of little towns" (Appendix B).

Foreman also writes about an interesting musical celebration that has slipped away from Muskogee's yearly calendar, "Emancipation Day," on the fourth of August when African-Americans acknowledged their emancipation from slavery. Foreman details some of the music taking place at the time, although he does not mention any particular tunes: "Day and night, from one end of the camp to the other, could be heard the voice of the lunch vendor, the squeak of the fiddles, and twang of banjos and guitars, accompanied by the voices of prompters on dance platforms" (Muskogee 127).

Although both West and Faulk provide thorough accounts of the economic development of early 20th century Muskogee and do mention some of the more prominent events and people in the African-American community, neither accounts for the growing racism in the state and the strong reaction to it from Muskogee's black leaders. West himself "pleads guilty" in his foreword to "'manipulating the news,' . . . with the feeling that the recounting of such would accomplish no good. It was noticeable that many of the problems that plague us in modern times were with us a century ago, sometimes to a larger degree" (Muskogee ii). Although Faulk and West provide important perspective, and publish many significant photos of Muskogee, their books are limited. During the pre-statehood period, Muskogee's African-American leaders show intellectual civil disobedience of the highest order and illustrate the roots of the 20th-century civil rights movement. As Kaye Teall points out, "One result of [the leaders' protests] was the production and training-by-experience of black leadership so that when the big Civil Rights push came in the late 1950s and after, there was no shortage of talented, dedicated, and trained people to lead the way, to serve as spokesmen" (193). Non-violent protest had not yet come into vogue, however, as W. H. Twine writes in a June 2, 1904 article that shows racism was not well accepted by African-Americans at the time:

A Negro who persisted in occupying a seat with a white man in a coach on the

north bound Katy train yesterday, got smashed in the mouth and is minus a few teeth and some hide. Officer Joe Depew, who was present, made a quick assessment of \$10 each for the episode and the parties continued their journey, but not in the same seat. (Muskogee Cimiter 2)

Twine also includes a headline from the local white paper, The Democrat, which had already run a story on separate rail cars under the headline "'S'matter with seperate (sic) coach law?" Then, Twine goes on to detail the scuffle:

It was an even scrap and honors were about even from what we can learn. The colored man was Rev. Walker, and every body knows Walker will defend himself. There was hide and teeth lost by both combatants. They say the preacher fought like hades.

Seperate (sic) coach don't go here, yet, brother. If you need one we advise you to migrate to the twin hell; Arkansas or Texas. (Muskogee Cimiter, 2 June, 1904: 2)

Also on June 2, 1904 Twine rails against "white folks so full of hellish prejudice that they blame all the Negroes for what one does," but acknowledges, "the majority are not in this class." He also notes that "The resolution adopted by the colored citizens of Wagoner show where our people stand as good citizens," and objects to threats in Tallahassee and Wagoner made against African-Americans in the area. Wagoner's African-American newspaper, The Echo expresses the joy and sadness of life in the territory for some of its most prosperous citizens. In same issue where a lynching is reported in the area, one finds an ad for The Maceo Hotel in Muskogee, "The best equipped colored hotel in the Southwest" (28 Jul. 1904: 1).

A general sense of chaos accompanied the prosperity of Muskogee. Along with the festering racism of the area, West quotes The Democrat in calling Muskogee "a city of frequent shootings and lawlessness in general" (Muskogee 95). Certainly, Muskogee would have been one of the towns described by James Haskins in his biography of Scott

Joplin. Haskins writes about Joplin as an itinerant pianist "[crisscrossing] the South and Midwest by train and river steamer, by wagon and on foot, performing wherever they could and for whatever they could get" (63). Haskins continues describing the area Joplin and his peers traversed: "Up and down the Mississippi River they traveled, and over into Kansas and Missouri, Oklahoma and Nebraska and Texas, in a time when those areas were in a constant state of flux" (63). Although the notion of Scott Joplin or his like playing at one of the "joints" on South Second Street is tantalizing, no mention specifically places him there. Haskins provides a colorful overview of railroad towns much like Muskogee (64-65).

The idea of ragtime and its purveyors traveling around the Southwest indicates musicians in Muskogee would have been directly exposed to this style of music. Furthermore, Joplin eventually lands in Sedalia, Missouri to make his home and his fame, because of the city's large sporting district (Haskins 88). This fact is notable because Sedalia was on the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas railroad line, and thereby connected to Muskogee. Although some African-American history can be gleaned from the sources already mentioned here, quotes are few and far between in Anglo-historians' accounts of the city. West notes that on June 13, 1904, "The Muskogee Comet, a newspaper published by Negroes, made its appearance" (Muskogee 96). West does not quote from the newspaper at all, since his book is based on clippings from The Democrat. A little more information can be gleaned from The Wagoner Echo. While mayhem raged in one area of the community, The Echo reports on October 1, 1904, "The Sango Baptist College at Muskogee opened on the 26th [of September] with quite a goodly number of students and competent corps of teachers" (1). Much more study needs to be done on the African-American newspapers of Indian Territory; books similar to West's could easily emerge from such study. For music purposes, The Cimiter not only includes important information about the period's social turbulence but provides the first mentions of a Black band, and perhaps the first historical mention of a "Territory Band."

In the June 16, 1904 Muskogee Cimiter, editor Twine writes, "Muskogee has the best colored band in the Territory, the boys are trying hard to reach perfection and our business men should help them by making them a present of a suit for each man." Certainly, brass bands were nothing new in Indian Territory. An ex-slave, Henry Pyles, remembered going to a picnic with his step-father after the Civil War: "That was the first picnic and de first brass band I ever see. De band men was all white men and they still had on their blue soldier clothes" (Baker and Baker 334). Ted Gioia, in The History of Jazz, explains,

...in the years following the Civil War, [brass bands] were organized in many cities and villages across the United States, with some towns hiring a professional bandmaster to organize and rehearse the group, while in many other instances - especially with the black bands - the units were sponsored by fraternal organizations, social clubs, or the musicians themselves. (32)

As for the music the black brass bands played, Gioia notes it was "remarkably varied" and laid the groundwork for jazz:

In addition to concert and march music, the ensembles also knew a range of quadrilles, polkas, schottisches, mazurkas, two-steps, and other popular dance styles. As the ragtime craze swept the country around the turn of the century, syncopated pieces became more and more frequently played by these bands, a shift that was accompanied by increased interest in "ragging" more traditional compositions. This blurring of music genres was central to the creation of jazz music. (History 33)

Although Gioia is talking about the black brass bands of New Orleans, certainly because of Muskogee's already established network of importing the latest cultural developments from the "outside" world, this group Twine writes about may have embodied some of the qualities of a New Orleans group. Evidently, the band from Muskogee was quite popular. Although not clearly defined, one might suppose the same group appeared at "A Jolly Earthquake of the Negro progressive club," advertised for July 28, 1904 in Wagoner, just



14 miles north of Muskogee by train (Wagoner: 1). Along with recitals, solos, and trios not clearly defined, The Wagoner Echo reminds readers, "There will be a band of music present to enliven the proceedings" (1). That date places the performance right in the middle of the previous mention in The Cimiter and just before the next one. More than likely, they would have been at some Emancipation Day picnic on August 4th, which may help account for another mention of them in other black newspapers of the state that carried social news of big events. On August 8, 1904 Twine tells readers, "The colored band boys are furnishing music for the picnic at Corretta this week. Our boys deserve the patronage of the public" (1). One might certainly infer by the dates of The Cimiter and The Echo that this might be the same band; however, no clear explanation exists for this early 1900s African-American mystery group. So far, these musicians have proved the most elusive and alluring. And, whereas no mention is ever made by Faulk, West, or Foreman about the black band, Twine does mention developments in the overall community in the August 8, 1904 issue: "the building of the Opera House and a five story hotel and the street railway . . . are a few of the improvements on tap" (1). The Cimiter's final mention of the band is on August 25, 1904 when the group played at a political meeting that turned riotous:

The Lincoln Club had a meeting, a water melon feast, and a rough house all at the same time. . . . Everyone had a good time, no body hurt seriously, and only a few bruised heads which added flavor to the feast. When the mogul yelled put (the fight starter) out, the band played "A hot time in the old town" and the hot time was on.

One cuss saved his bacon by hiding among the band boys. (1)

This is the last mention of the group in The Cimiter as the social atmosphere in Muskogee rapidly declines with oncoming statehood. In the September 22, 1904 issue, Twine writes, "Social relations among our own people are about the average and at almost any time desired a large number of well trained people of the race can be gathered together than in any other town of its size in the country" (2). Twine appeals to readers to understand:

As to the relations between the races it may be said truthfully (sic) that when all things are taken into consideration, this country in general and Muskogee in particular outstrip any part of the United States. It must be remembered that we have all the races of the world to contend with. (2)

As Muskogee grew, so did its social problems, but not before the African-American business district flourished. By October 6, 1904, Twine reports in the Cimiter that "There is a move on foot to pave Second Street from Okmulgee avenue to Elgin avenue. When this is done, Second Street will be one of the best business streets in the city" (2). This paving would have made the blocks from Muskogee's main east-west street, Okmulgee, south to Elgin where the Midland Valley depot remains, currently being furbished as a museum, as urbane as any all-Black blocks in the United States. Indeed, not only South Second Street prospered, but the entire Black community's economy surged. Under the headline "How Is This For Colored Enterprise?", the December 8, 1904 Cimiter excerpt reports the following activity:

Muskogee now has 27 colored grocery stores, 7 meat markets, 1 undertaking establishment with branch house in Wagoner, one furniture store, 25 restaurants and cold drink stands, 2 banks, 2 first class cafes, 7 good hotels, 1 first class livery and sale stable, 1 jewelry store. A first class drug store will soon be opened on South 2nd Street. In addition, we have 8 physicians, 8 lawyers, several real estate companies, the largest of which is the Afro-American Investment Company, 1 employment agency, 3 good barber shops, 1 first class electrician, 3 newspapers. (2)

Muskogee's black-owned businesses continued to grow. Franklin also discusses the preeminence of Muskogee's African-American businesses:

Muskogee claimed nearly two dozen establishments in 1905, among them a jewelry store, a butcher shop, a clothing store, an amusement hall, a bank, and horse and buggy stables for the rental of carriages. There were also cotton buyers and

ginners, and blacks who bought and sold farm commodities. (Journey 25)

1904 was a bellwether year for black Muskogee and the economic viability of the community, but 1905 would prove to be the beginning of the end of African-American sovereignty, equality, and independence as the white-dominated statehood convention issued warnings of a storm that would linger for fifty years.

### **Statehood<sup>5</sup>**

Any standard history of Oklahoma will detail the basic events that comprised the two-year process of statehood from 1905 to 1907. However, many of those histories exclude the way in which African-Americans and American Indians were disfranchised during the process or as a result of it. Although Ewin McCabe's attempt at an all-Black state had already failed (Teall 150), Muskogee Chief Pleasant Porter felt Indian Territory had the potential to become a state called Sequoyah. H. Wayne Morgan and Anne Hodges Morgan describe the Sequoyah statehood convention in Oklahoma: A History:

The 182 men who gathered in Muskogee on August 21, 1905, represented the most distinguished and influential citizens of Indian Territory. The elected [Creek Chief] Porter president of the convention . . . The vice-presidents included [Muskogee railroad promoter and first governor of Oklahoma] Haskell . . . and William H. Murray. These two men formed an alliance at Muskogee that affected the new state of Oklahoma's politics for some three decades. (78)

The Morgans detail the history of Murray, an intermarried tribal citizen of the Chickasaws who used his tribal status to become a tribal attorney, which, in turn, provided him the funds to acquire extensive tribal acreage. And, because of his experiments at growing alfalfa, "he was later widely known as 'Alfalfa Bill'" (Oklahoma: A History 78). Although the convention's constitution was ratified by Indian Territory's voters 56,279 to 9,073, Theodore Roosevelt denied the petition and "the long hope of an Indian

commonwealth was extinguished forever" (Morgan and Morgan Oklahoma: A History 81; Faulk, Muskogee 79).

Although the convention did attempt to maintain tribal sovereignty, apparently the African-Americans were roundly ignored. As Tolson writes, "Black leaders were alarmed at the Jim Crowism which reportedly pervaded the State Convention. They declared that tremendous odds confronted territorial Blacks in their attempt to do away with all forms of racial discrimination" (131). As a result, a "Black convention" was organized in Muskogee to promote statehood and get African-American delegates elected to upcoming statehood conventions which would attempt to draft a constitution that would join the twin territories and write laws for the new state (Tolson 131). Leaders made the following resolution:

Whereas, the 200,000 Negroes who live in the confines of Oklahoma and Indian Territory have not until this time had an opportunity to register their position on (the) question of statehood . . . be it resolved, that we favor joint and immediate statehood for Oklahoma and Indian Territories; that we favor the passage of the Hamilton Bill as being the safest guarantee of the civic rights of all the citizens and especially do we urge the passage of that clause of the said bill which refers to the suffrage of all the citizens without regard to color or previous condition of servitude. (Tolson 132)

As noted in the resolution, the aforementioned Hamilton Statehood Bill contained the provision that "said State shall never enact any law restricting or abridging the right of suffrage on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (Tolson 133). In the Spring of 1906, President Roosevelt signed the Oklahoma Enabling Act that authorized a constitutional convention to create the state and, "Significantly," according to Tolson, "the Oklahoma Enabling Act contained the Section 3 of the old Hamilton Bill which guaranteed Black suffrage (133-4). This was only a small victory for blacks

concerned about their civic status; Jim Crow laws hovered on the western horizon as the state constitutional convention assembled in Guthrie in November of 1906.

As the constitutional convention progressed, "Alfalfa" Bill Murray became the dominant force since he had participated in the Sequoyah Convention and was an active member in the Farmers' Union (Morgan and Morgan, Oklahoma: A History (82). It soon became apparent that racism would play a part in the drafting of the new state constitution. As the Morgans write, "[Murray] called for a constitution to protect the rights of Indians and whites equally, though that tolerance did not extend to black Oklahomans. Racial segregation was a major issue in the selection of delegates" (84). The Morgans cite Murray's views that "it is an equally false notion that the Negro can rise to the equal of the white man in the professions, or become an equal citizen to grapple with public questions" (Oklahoma: A History 84). Murray had obviously not been reading The Muskogee Cimiter. Nonetheless, racial tension was very much a part of the convention and "profoundly affected the new state's political system" (Morgan and Morgan, Oklahoma: A History 85). As a result of Murray's tribal status, however, he did not want to affect the social standing of either his children or other tribal members (Morgan and Morgan, Oklahoma: A History 85). Therefore, he ensured that the constitution delineated "colored" as any person of African descent. As Morgans explain, however, those terms were not strict enough for the seventy-five delegates born in South, most of whom had campaigned on promises to include rigid Jim Crow restrictions in the new constitution (Oklahoma: A Histoory 85). Morgan continues,

Haskell and Murray warned against including those provisions in the constitution. They feared, correctly, that President Theodore Roosevelt and the national Republican party would reject a constitution that was blatantly discriminatory. The Jim Crow laws were removed, with the tacit understanding that the first legislature would enact them. (Oklahoma: A History 85)

Although the Jim Crow legislation was not yet in place, harsh sentiments were already surfacing in Muskogee. The February 8, 1907 Cimiter provides an excellent example of the existence of both African-American culture at the time, as well as the brooding racism, which was apparently resounding throughout the state. As an example of the "cultivated" culture in African-American Muskogee, 200 "colored" citizens of Muskogee enjoyed a sacred concert at the Lyric Theatre on February 2, 1907. The Cimiter report notes performances of hymns, "Happy Days," recitations, a rendition of "Holy City" that was "out of sight," a violin solo, a solo version of "Glory to Thee, My God, Tonight," and the hit of the evening, "You Will Miss the Colored Soldiers." The writer reports the evening was not a financial success but was "the most brilliant undertaking of its kind ever held in the city. The participants received the praise and thanks of the best colored people in the city" (2). On the same page, however, an editorialist, most likely Twine, writes,

We would like to know the names of two white gentlemen who conducted themselves so ungentlemanly and brutally at the Lyric Theatre Sunday night prior to the opening. We will give five yearly subscriptions for the names of those whisky (sic) soaked brutes, and then we can take them under prayerful consideration. (The Muskogee Cimiter, 8 Feb. 1907: 2)

The men's drunken hoots reflected sentiments that would soon surface legally with the ratification of statehood. Editor and Attorney Twine knew he had to do all he could to stop the ratification of statehood. Twine must have been talking about ratification two months before, as the September 19, 1907 Muskogee Times Democrat quotes him as saying "we shall see if the President won't turn the rotten document down" (qtd. in Family 35). The Democrat also notes that some Republican leaders in Muskogee will not be showing the Twine cause any sympathy, as "The white politicians of the Republican persuasion realize how they are placed in reference to the Negro and are beginning to chafe under the burden" (qtd. in Twine 35). Two weeks before President Theodore Roosevelt signed Oklahoma onto the United States map, Twine led a delegation of

African-Americans from Indian Territory to Washington D. C. in order to file a protest with the President. The delegation's legal representative, attorney J. Milton Turner, tells a Globe Democrat reporter about the purpose of the protesters,

These people are justly apprehensive on account of the persissent (sic) assaults of the Constintutional convention upon their rights and the outrageous frauds perpetrated upon them at the election held for the purpose of ratifying the constitution of the proposed state. They have the best of reason to fear that the first legislature held under the new state constitution will make the abrogation of their property rights the prime subject of legislation. There is nothing political in the movement. The thoughtful Negroes have long since concluded that they can not govern where they do not own. Many influential Negroes throughout the United States have determined to make a final stand for citizenship in the Indian Territory, where they already own and are in possession of 4,800,000 acres of land. Organizations are springing up all over the country, especially in the South, for the peaceful invasion of that territory, making this landed ownership a nucleus about which to culminate the redistribution within the cotton belt of Negro labor." -Globe Democrat (qtd. in The Cimiteer 1 Nov. 1907: 1)

The delegation saw the President but he was not swayed and approved the statehood legislation. The day before President Roosevelt signed the Oklahoma statehood proclamation on November 16, 1907, W. H. Twine issued one of his own in a November 15 *Cimiteer* editorial under the headline of "Show Down," quoted here in its entirety because of its significance:

After it is all over and the highest tribunal in the country has decided that the constitution is in accordance with the enabling act, then it is the duty of all good citizens to bow in submission to the order of those in authority and "eat their crow and say it is good."

The decision means that the NEGRO MUST, IN THIS NEW STATE, MAKE A

STAND THAT HAS NEVER BEFORE BEEN OUR PRIVILEGE TO MAKE and that is we come in at the very beginning of statehood and we must face conditions as they are and not as they ought to be. We have 250,000 people in this new state and own not less than 400,000 acres of land of a value of not less than \$100,000,000 and the question is shall we give away our ownings and go elsewhere and start anew? or shall we play the part of MEN and make a stand - a fight for our rights as citizens of this GREAT REPUBLIC? This state is cosmopolitan in its makeup; we have people here from every country, race and clime and the Negro, the native American who has always been loyal to the FLAG, is here striving to make for himself and family a home where he can reside in peace.

After making many changes and travelling thousands of miles to find a place where he could BREATHE THE AIR OF LIBERTY and build a home where his children could live and learn to fight the battle of life in a free country, he selected Indian Territory, now a part of Oklahoma as that place. We have come here from all states in the Sunny Southland and elsewhere (sic); we have invested our little mites in this great commonwealth and it does not matter to us who holds the offices, all we ask and insist upon is a "SQUARE DEAL UNDER THE LAW."

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES WILL WE GIVE UP OUR HOMES, OUR PROPERTY INTEREST AND AGAIN BECOME WANDERERS SEARCHING FOR A PLACE WHERE THE LAW AND THE PEOPLE WILL ACCORD TO ALL CITIZENS THEIR RIGHTS, NO MATTER OF WHAT RACE, OR COLOR, OR CREED.

We have found a place to our liking and will remain here in spite of all opposition. It is the last and only place upon American soil for the American Negro to carve out a home for himself and his posterity. If there is any opposition to our position, then we must not play the Coward but must stand up like Men and face our opponents. It is no time to run and only cowards are guilty of such. There is



yet hope for better things.

God hates a coward. He who would be free must strike for himself. Let us face conditions like men and use any and all things at our command for our PROTECTION and for the PROTECTION of our CHILDREN and our HOMES. Our advice is that every man stand his [ground] for rights, fight for his rights, and if necessary die for his rights. Let not one who believes in right and justice and who is a man, quit at this time.

Let us stay on the ground. We are rightfully here-we are bearing our part of the burden. Let us continue to do so, and if there is opposition, let us fight that opposition till hell freezes and then continue to battle on the ice. To do less would be cowardly and one who does less is not worth his room in hell.

Even with the severity of that editorial on the minds of future Oklahomans, the next day, ceremonies took place in Guthrie to mark the statehood proclamation. As Morgan and Morgan relate,

Whites from Indian Territory had come to celebrate their new full citizenship in the new state. Many spectators came to see the symbolic marriage of a Cherokee bride in a beaded-buckskin, Plains Indian wedding outfit to a young man from Indian Territory. Hundreds more simply came for the outing, or to sample an array of barbecue and picnic dinners. (Oklahoma: A History 91)

Twine had already heard about the picnics, and immediately after his proclamation of November 15, 1907, he writes, "Over at Guthrie, it is said there will be no discrimination but the Negroes must eat last. Well the Negroes should stay away from the blamed barbecue and have nothing to do with the inauguration. Watch the Negro who does have anything to do with it" (2). Interestingly, perhaps less out of optimism or just plain paid advertising, and more in hopes of bolstering the region's African-American population, an advertisement in the November 15 Cimeter also proclaims,

The Indian Territory and Oklahoma are now a new state. Thousands of our

native people are land holders and have thousands of Acres of Rich Land to rent and Lease.

We prefer to rent and to lease our lands to Colored People. Our terms will be found reasonable. . . .

You are invited to come and share and enjoy our lands and our prosperity in the New State of Oklahoma. (7)

With statehood, unfortunately, Oklahoma would be anything but hospitable to residents of African descent, much less newcomers. Yet the foundation had been laid for strong African-American communities from which important citizens, to include American professionals, authors, historians, and musicians, would come.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed map and history of the Battle of Honey Springs see Morris et.al. Historical Atlas of Oklahoma.

<sup>2</sup> Although not much material exists in the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma Library archive for the black towns in Eastern Oklahoma, one box of photographs and other materials donated by the Twine family of Muskogee helps flesh out the picture of the African-American experience in Indian Territory at the turn of the 20th century. Some excellent photos of Muskogee's African-American businesses on South Second are included in that box.

<sup>3</sup> For other possible origins of the term "ragtime," see Haskins.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent explanation of the pre-history of jazz, its early days including the African origins of the music, its development as ragtime and New Orleans jazz, see Gioia History.

<sup>5</sup> See the survey of literature in this dissertation for general surveys of Oklahoma history.

CHAPTER FOUR  
AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND JAZZ IN MUSKOGEE,  
OKLAHOMA, 1907-1945

During the period from Oklahoma's statehood up through World War II, Muskogee experienced the social and economic roller coaster that much of the United States rode during the same years.

For African-Americans, statehood brought separate coach laws and the beginnings of the racist society that would oppress their natural rights for fifty years. Muskogee itself experienced a population boom through 1910, before the city began slipping as an important economic center as a result of the oil boom in Tulsa. Muskogee surged back during World War I, experienced a Ku Klux Klan revival in the 1920s, and, as most of the rest of the U.S., weathered the 1930s depression before witnessing an economic upturn as a result of the influx of workers and service people during the World War II years. Throughout these years, the African-American community in Muskogee remained cohesive, with a solid intellectual, moral, and economic underpinning by which both African-Americans and America's classical music, jazz, could thrive.

To begin with, Muskogee's African-American business district on South Second Street burst with musical possibilities two months before statehood. The Sanborn Map Company's Insurance Maps of Muskogee, Oct. 1907 detail the three blocks of South Second from West Okmulgee to Elgin, site of the Midland Valley Passenger Station on the tracks running east to west. One block east of South Second is Main Street and the historic M, K & T tracks. The Sanborn Map shows African-American commercial enterprises such as a bank, barbers, restaurants, shoe shines, and stores for furniture, clothes, drugs, and meats. Interestingly, both the city hall and the fire department are located on the African-American section of South Second Street. Also, Barney Kessel's father's shoe store and clothing store are delineated by the term "cobbler,"

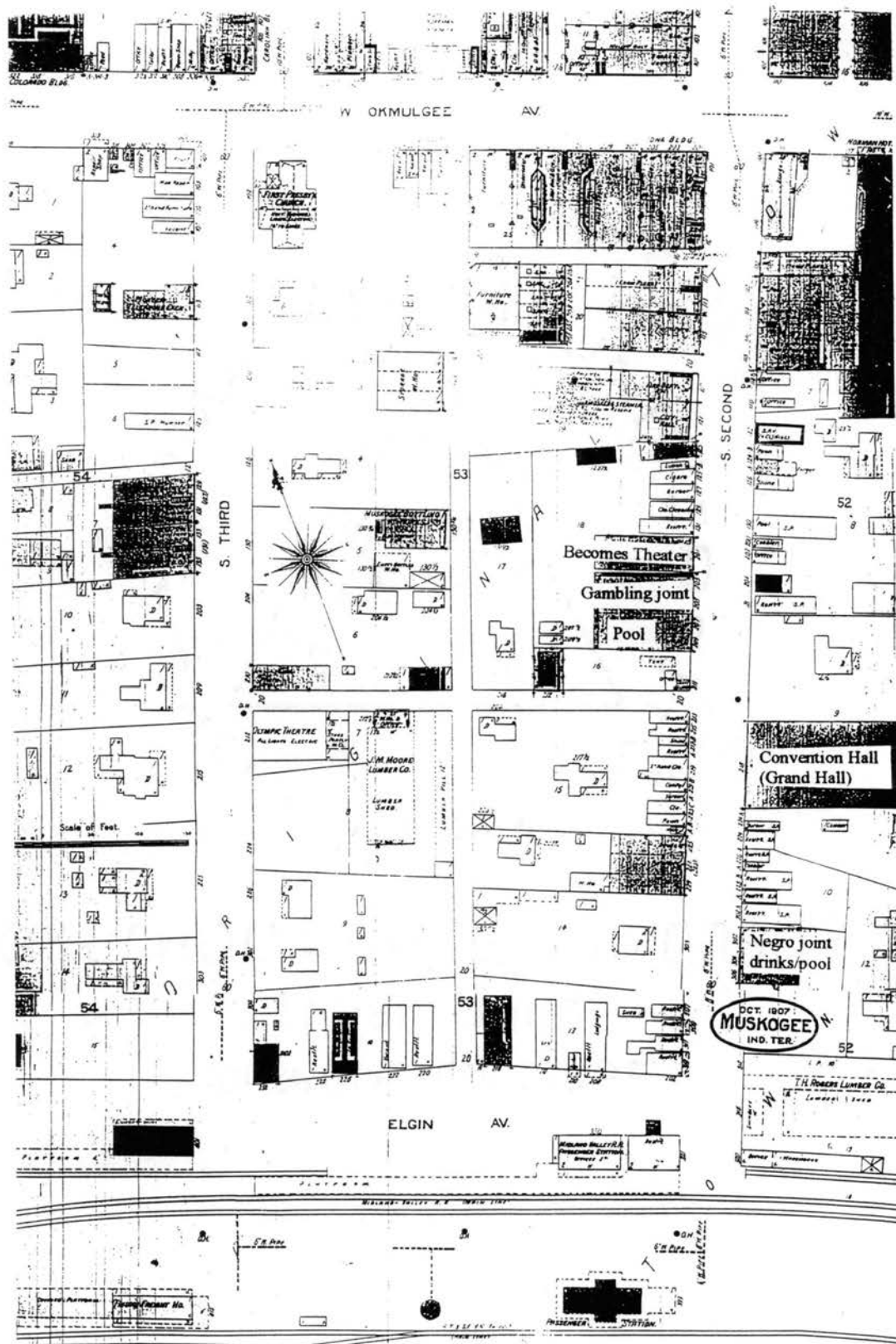


Fig. 11. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Muskogee (1907).

using the old term for one who makes shoes.<sup>1</sup> Kessel is the only non-African-American in this study, but he grew up in the heart of the African-American business and entertainment district, literally next door to the Covention Hall where dances were regularly held. The significant elements of the 1907 Sanborn Map certainly indicate that places existed where music might or would have been played. The Sanborn Map surveys two pool halls, a shooting gallery, a "Negro" theater, gambling joint, the convention hall (which had two dance floors), and a "Negro" joint for drinks and pool at the south end of South Second Street, just before the Midland Valley tracks. Certainly this environment would match up with the milieu necessary for both the previously mentioned territorial ragtime pianists, as well as the rowdy string bands and more cultured brass bands of the time.<sup>2</sup> Although Jelly Roll Morton and Scott Joplin are not yet documented to have played in Muskogee, biographies of both primary jazz musicians place them traveling through the territories on trains. Muskogee was a nexus for regional travel, commerce, and entertainment of all kinds, and any musician traveling through the area would certainly have known of the city whose large African-American population continued to add to its status as an attractive destination.

With regard to Muskogee's growth from 1890-1910, Morris explains, "During the 20 year period . . . Muskogee changed from a rural town to the second largest city in Oklahoma" (61). Along with the promotional literature distributed through the South to freedmen, other contributions to the rise included the discovery of oil, statehood that "tamed" the Indian Territory for United States citizens, Muskogee's continuing economic significance as a shipping and passenger point for "six railroads with 14 passenger trains daily" (Morris 62). The floodgates opened, however, when Congress passed legislation in 1908 dividing tribal lands among individual members and freeing the rest for sale. The devastating ramifications of which--dividing up what had been considered communal land--was the continuation of disenfranchisement begun when DeSoto first met the Muscogee in 1541.<sup>3</sup> Muskogee's population increased from 37, 467 in 1907 to 52,

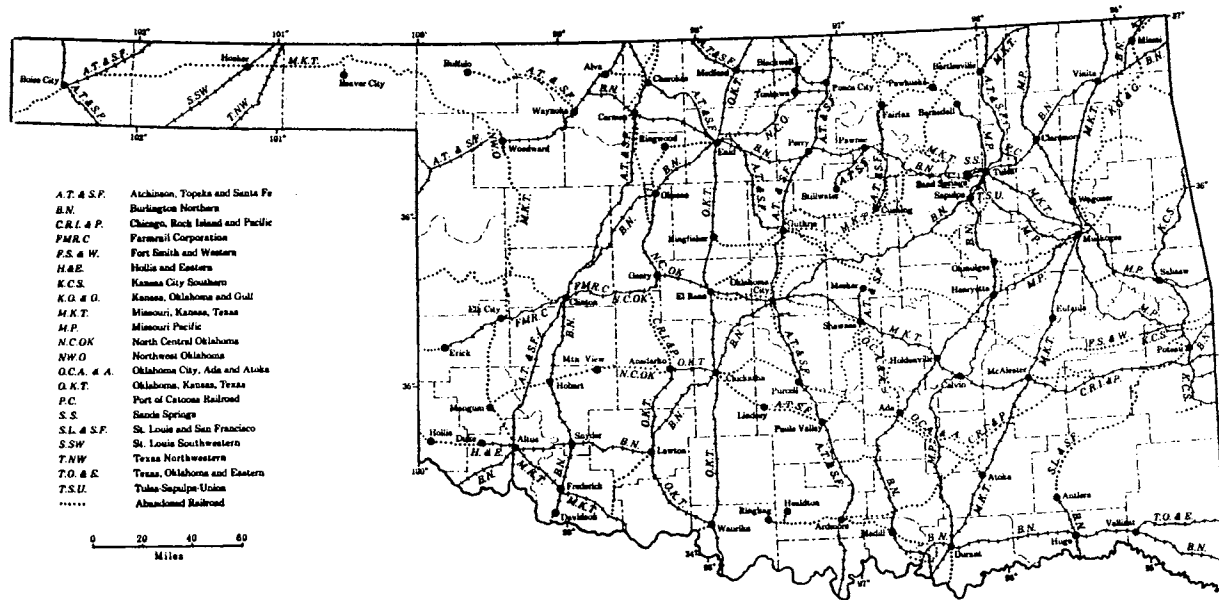


Fig. 12. Railroads in Oklahoma (1870-1985), map 64 from John W. Morris, et. al., Historical Atlas of Oklahoma (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

743 in 1910. Creek Nation surplus lands were opened up to both Anglo and African-Americans, most of whom were farmers needing implements, food, seed, and clothing, which Muskogee provided (Faulk 83). Faulk also details the booming construction, bond approvals, manufacturing plants, and other successes of the era (85-87), but no mention is made of the racism dividing the city and the defiance with which the city's black leaders faced that indignity.

### **Statehood and Separate Facilities**

The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* U.S. Supreme Court ruling which indicated that separate but equal facilities were legal, sanctioned Jim Crow laws on a national level. The first Oklahoma legislature was quick to follow suit, with Senate Bill Number one, or the Jim Crow law, which Governor Haskell signed on December 18, 1907, just thirty-two days after statehood (Tolson 146). Although not included in the state's constitution, as previously discussed, a tacit understanding existed among Oklahoma Constitutional Convention members that a "separate coach" law would be instituted immediately after statehood. The first set of state laws that went on the books in Oklahoma included the "separate coach," "waiting room," and "restroom" laws, which made it "unlawful for any person to use or occupy or remain in any waiting room, toilet room, or at any water tank in any passenger depot in this State, set apart to a race to which he does not belong" (General 1222). The law required "warm" and "well lighted" waiting rooms and facilities, as well provided the legal backing for a conductor to remove any passenger not following these rules, and a penalty for not doing so (General 1222-23).<sup>4</sup> As Franklin notes, the laws had tremendous resonance in the white community: "the passage of segregation laws helped to internalize a behavior toward blacks that led toward increased racial antipathy and hatred" (46).

Although disenchanted and ready to protest, The Cimiter had enough sense of humor to print a poem by Professor Charles Biggers on January 3, 1908, which illustrates both



Muskogee's mythic qualities in the Southwestern African-American consciousness at the time, as well as the twenty-eight year old's perspective of the oncoming political maelstrom. Even the young man's perspective may have been swayed by not actually having lived in the town, but Muskogee certainly must have been inspiring, as the following poem attests:

"Great Muskogee"

If you want to find a city  
That they say is "out of sight,"  
Just locate to Muskogee  
And you will be alright.

For it's the booming city,  
The greatest in the West;  
That mighty, mighty city  
Where money has no rest.

The "Cimiter" can tell you  
Of laurels to be won  
In this city where people  
Are aiming at the sun.

It will tell you of the land  
And how it can be bought  
It will tell of our shorthand.  
And how it can be taught<sup>5</sup>

We're now in the capital city

Of the Oklahoma state  
Whe[re] the democratic legislature  
Is trying to seal the Negro's fate.

But Muskogee, great Muskogee  
Is where the Negro is doing well  
Where to find him doing better  
"It will take a God to tell."

There is hustling and bustling  
Tustling and rustling:  
In this great growing city  
Nothing lays rusting.

Editors are busy  
Telling what is doing,  
And everything old  
Is swiftly renewing

Hotels are crowded  
Morning, noon, and night;  
People coming to the city  
That "they say is out of sight."

Then read of this great city,  
The greatest in the West;  
This mighty, might city

Where money has no rest. (1:1)

However entertaining this may have been to readers, in the very same issue, The Cimiter explains the only way to avoid a lynch mob is "to own a good gun; learn to use it and then when the time comes use it in the protection of law and order. The Negro must obey the law but he should fight for his rights" (1:1). Usually, such militant comments are reserved in African-American civil rights history to the 1960s. The Cimiter continues expressing the urgency of the situation in 1908:

God hates a coward and if the Negro wants the love of his Creator he must fight for the right. "Trust in God and keep your powder dry." THE NEGRO CAN WILL. AND MUST MAKE A RECORD IN THE NEW STATE - one of which Negroes of the world may be proud. (2)

Finally, The Cimiter, most likely Twine, explains no sacrifice is too large for this cause: "A mob is a - - cowardly outfit at best and any brave man can afford to give his life in order to teach the cowards a lesson. There is no better place in which to teach the lesson than the new state" (3 Feb. 1908).

As Tolson notes, "Black Oklahoman leaders raised a storm of protest against the Jim Crow law" (147) Such was the case in the Muskogee area, as in the month of February, The Cimiter reports of an Anti-Jim Crow Convention meeting in Wagoner. The convention drafted a report, saying, among other things,

The Negroes of Oklahoma . . . under the auspices of the Anti-Jim Crow League emphatically condemn the Jim Crow car law recently passed by the Oklahoma Legislature and now being enforced by the various railroads and street railways operating in the state of Oklahoma. We believe that such legislation will not add to the harmony or peace that ought to exist in our state. . .

We believe said Jim Crow car law to be in direct violation of the federal constitution and a violation of our civil rights and we earnestly indorse (sic) the suits instituted by W.H. Twine and W. A. Rentie to test its constitutionality. (28

Feb. 1908: 1)

Prominent African-Americans from the state's second largest city, such, as Rentie,<sup>6</sup> Sango, and Twine, did not go quietly on the issue, although Tolson remarks, "they received scant sympathy from the legislators" (147). Other items were pressing as well, namely, more lands of the Five Tribes becoming available for public purchase in May of 1908. A period of prosperity followed, as Tolson explains, "Discovery of rich oil fields on lands of restricted Indians in remote parts of the Territory brought oil leases, money, and operators by the thousands to the Indian offices in Muskogee" (140). In the middle of the prosperity, but aware of the diminishing rights for its African-American citizens, The Cimiter reports the news from the national perspective with a "special" from another Muskogee paper, The Democrat, citing the law will take effect sixty days thence, and that "The bill was fought desperately up to the very hour it was signed by a delegation of negro politicians and some Indians" (May 29, 1908). Then, The Cimiter stresses the opportunity and the finality of the situation from the local perspective :

Sixty days from this day there will be thousands of acres of good land on the market. Our people, who are hemmed up in the old states, should take advantage of this last chance and buy a home in the most progressive state in the Union. White people are coming here from the world over and why not the negro who lives next door[.] [C]ome and get a home at a reasonable price. For over ten years we have been asking our people to come and I locate in this splendid country. This is the last call, don't fail to heed it. Never again will our people have such an opportunity to buy a home. (May 29, 1908)

Urgency and caution can be detected in the writer's tone, as well as the continued optimism that shaped the all-Black town recruitment, and is reflected in the previously quoted poem by Biggers.

Disheartening as the Jim Crow legislation was to Muskogee's African-American leaders, other parts of the community relied on the solidity of its religious foundation and,

not surprisingly, music to help distract from the unpleasantness growing around them. The Cimiter reports a ten day "Musical Bazaar" will be given by the First Baptist Church beginning June 1. "A splendid program has been arranged," hypes the article, "and the very best talent of your city will be on hand to gratify the public, pure and clean in every particular. It will be ten days of christian merriment in which every father, mother and child can join. Go and enjoy what is pure and ennobling" (May 29, 1908). Even though the dark cloud of racism loomed omnipresently on the horizon, Muskogee's African-American community continued thriving as a result of the solid economic, civic and moral foundation already in place since the last half of the 19th century.

Throughout the Cimiter's pages are a multitude of stories depicting the harsh conditions of Jim Crow Oklahoma, from lynchings to the lack of adherence to the "warm" and "well lighted" portions of Oklahoma's separate facilities law. Under a headline of "Outrages at Jim Crow Depot," Twine details the deterioration of race relations in Muskogee in the February 12, 1909 Cimiter:

The M. K. & T [railroad] depot at Muskogee in so far as the Jim Crow part is concerned is a disgrace to civilization. Colored women have to suffer all kinds of discomfort and the toilet is a disgrace even to savages. The [railroad] police are discourteous as it is possible to be and on many occasions they arrest strangers who come to town and charge them with loafing. . . . An officer who arrests a Negro and threatens him with the saying "I come d--- rough on you kind" and is a d--- coward and belongs to the low class of white men who cause trouble between the races.

(2)

The tension furthered in 1910 when the Oklahoma legislature made the right to vote "contingent upon a person's ability to read or write a section of the Oklahoma constitution," and "exempted, or 'grandfathered,' those persons who had ancestors eligible to vote before January 1, 1866" (Franklin 109). Tolson explains that once again Muskogee became the center for discussion of the topic and the city's leaders strongly

protested the passage of the "grandfather clause" amendment. Led by A.G.W. Sango, "[citizens] took steps to 'wage war on the legality' of the amendment which disfranchised (sic) the colored race" (qtd. in Tolson 156). Franklin explains the effects of the grandfather clause were to "permit virtually all whites to vote but would disfranchise all blacks except those who could satisfy those voting officials who tested for literacy" (109). The resulting state vote officially ended the external voice of African-Americans in Oklahoma's state politics until the law was ruled unconstitutional by the U. S. Supreme Court in 1915. Not only were the blacks disenfranchised, a dark period of physical elimination of blacks from some cities and counties followed, but Muskogee's African-American community, again led by W. H. Twine (WHT), provided a strong example of the city's collective effort to thwart racism.

Linda Twine notes that lynchings were rampant from 1907 to 1915. Tolson concurs when he writes, "During the years of World War One, Oklahoma was now nearly as infamous for its race relations as the Southern states, and Blacks, seeking better environmental situations were heading North" (Family 167). Examples of this include the Thomas Brothers, whose family moved to Topeka, and Clarence Love, whose family moved to Kansas City. Back in Muskogee, however, W. H. Twine "vowed with other community leaders that there would never be a lynching in Muskogee County" (Family 39). Linda Twine recounts several instances of "The Black Tiger's" resistance to white terrorism of the day. WHT retold the story of one attempted lynching in Muskogee that he and his cohorts turned back:

A crowd of 5,000 gathered around the jail for a lynching bee. We begged the sherriff to disperse the crowd but he could not do so. We then went to the best white citizens and begged and employed them to stop the gang of cut-throats from committing the crime of lynching, and they tried to do so, but failed. The howling mob, thirsting for blood, attempted to storm the jail, and then a strange thing happened. Our group (including the writer) lost their religion and suddenly from

somewhere 300 men with high-powered rifles sprang forward and faced the cowards and served notice that a number of FREE TICKETS TO HELL were to be given Gratis and the mob went hurriedly to their homes.

This is our antidote for mob violence. Later, a white man [charged with murder] was brought to Muskogee from Wagoner County for safety . . . and a mob from that country started for Muskogee to wreak their vengeance on the prisoner.

Our group served notice that they must not cross the Arkansas River, which is the division line between this and Wagoner County. We also stated that we are opposed to mob violence and no man, white or black, could be mobbed in this county. (qtd. in Family 40)

The African-American newspapers and their staunch defense of their readers' rights, and the undeniable economic and social force of blacks in the larger towns and cities, like Muskogee, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa, ensured those communities would develop insulated cities within cities, where people of African descent could enjoy the social opportunities experienced by much of the rest of the United States's cosmopolitan areas, which, in turn, fostered the development of musicians, black and white.

### **African-American Music in Early 20th Century Muskogee**

Music was very much a part of most homes at the turn of the 20th century, and Muskogee's African-American families were no different. As noted earlier, Broadway conductor Linda Twine was responsible for putting together her family's history for a 1987 reunion. In the compilation, a number of family memories involve music. Pliny Twine, born in 1900 and son of the now famous W. H. Twine, remembers his mother teaching the children "a lot of little songs. . . 'Among the Prayers' was one. . . . She'd have us singing and just look back and rap you one if you got out of key" (32). Pliny also fills in more significant elements of Muskogee's music scene. He says, "Most places had pianos. In fact, they had a piano in the pool hall. They'd have a guy come in to sing and we'd watch

and try to imitate him" (32). He even explains how children, he was seven at the time, got involved in the traveling medicine shows:

I don't know how this fella found out about Will Rowe and me. He might have just seen us dancin' and singin' and carryin' on. So he hired us for this old doctor show. There was an old boy around here named Thurston Briggs who was quite a dancer and we learned steps from him. . . . The medicine show people taught us a little acting. Will was a tall, lanky, light skinned boy who played the part of "Bert Williams" and wore black faced make-up. I was "George Walker", the straight man. We danced, sang and did a comedy routine. (32)

Pliny also recalls what his father thought about people who went into music, "Papa didn't want any of us to fool with music. A lot of those old timers had the idea that most musicians who accomplished anything in the early days could only work in gambling and sporting houses and places like that" (Twine 39). Jay McShann says the same thing about his parents in his oral history:

They was still hard on me, you know what I mean. They'd say, "We don't want you playing over there, at this place or that place." Some people would come out who used to have things out in the country towns. They'd say, "We hear your boy plays piano. We are going to have picnic out there at such and such a day. We sure would like for him to come out there and play for us. We'll pay him." Well, you know how those staunch Christians are supposed to be. [My folks] would say, "Well, we're very particular about this boy and we don't want him out there getting the wrong ideas," and so on, and so on. I'd just get sick of listening to that, you know, but I had to go by the rules. So, if they could jive the folks well enough, the folks would say, "Alright, we'll trust him with you." I always had to tell people to ask my folks because they was kind of funny about me playing. (Appendix E)

Nonetheless, all the venues for music that existed around the major cities of the Southwest were present in Muskogee in the early 20th century. Although the precursors



and developmental stages of jazz may have been occurring all around W. H. Twine, he did not like the "lower-class of Negroes" who shot dice in his doorway on South Second Street. So strongly did he feel, that he actually moved his offices, but even WHT could not deny his wife's musical abilities.

As Linda Twine writes, "[Mittie] could read music and spent many an hour playing the upright piano in the front room of 706 South Fifth Street" (39). In fact, her side of the family brought a lot of music into Muskogee, which also shows the way in which the town attracted musicians, or shows that more people of that era could play music. Both of Mittie's half brothers, Ralph and Herman Ransom were musicians. Although Ralph played guitar, he was also a telegraph operator and notary. Herman, on the other hand, "was a professional musician that played all over the country. He moved from Mexia to Muskogee when the Twines settled in Indian Territory" (39). The dates are not easy to figure out, but Herman's abilities seem to bridge the string and brass band traditions. Pliny remembers, "Herman could play a piano, pick all kinds of stringed instruments and blow a trumpet. In the band, there was a bass fiddle, guitar, a mandolin played by Herman, and another guy played some other instrument" (39). The string band Pliny describes is very much like the string band in which Claude Williams talks about playing in around 1918 in his oral history, and the Oklahoma City band that Blesh describes in Shining Trumpets. Claude Williams describes the string bands he would join up with during those years:

They used to come by and ask my mother if they could take me out of town. We'd go as far as over to Tulsa and other little towns around. We'd make eight or ten dollars or night. At that time, they was working all week for seven dollars, a dollar a day. We'd go to Okmulgee and other towns and do what we called "hustling." We used to call it "bustin'." We'd always be in a hotel or barber shop or something. I remember at one time we eased in some hotel. There was enough room for us to get inside the door before going upstairs. We started playing downstairs and people would throw money down to us." (Appendix B)

Of course, the string bands were not the only music playing in the African-American community. In 1915, The Cimiter reports, "[The] Texas Orphans Jubilee Singers Will sing the old Plantation Negro Melodies Tuesday Night . . . 10c for both young and old . . . The Singers have both State and National Reputation, and a great Capacity to entertain Large Audiences" (July 3). The summer of 1915 also hosted the "First Negro Independent State Fair," featuring "25,000 NEGROES IN LINE" during the parade, as well as horse and automobile races during the fair (Cimiter Aug. 14). By 1917, a "Big Minstrel" show is billboarded for the Convention Hall in The Cimiter, which also notes "The Merry Minstrel of the Business League Meets every Monday and Thursday Nights, at Carter Hall for practise (sic)" (Jan. 20). Around the same time, WHT's sons, Chauncey and Harry, attended Manual Training High School, Muskogee's school for African-Americans under the "separate but equal" legislation. As both Jay McShann and Clarence Love discuss in their oral histories, music was very much a part of the experience at Manual Training. The Twine Brothers were quite popular at Manual, and not the least of reasons was their musical ability. Chauncey's wife, Nadine, remembers, "Harry and about two or three other pianists played for the dances at school . . . He could really go to town on that 'Twelfth Stree Rag.' He'd have that foot out to the side just tappin'" (Twine 36-38) This quote illustrates the lingering presence of ragtime in Muskogee, however, Linda Twine also notes, "While Harry provided the music, Chauncey was winning prizes in the waltz contests," further indicating the musical melange swirling about in Muskogee, an environment very conducive to the inter-cultural development of jazz (Twine 36-38). Therefore, not only the evolving jazz idiom was present in Muskogee in the first twenty years of the 20th century, but so were the oldest African-American melodic traditions, contemporary religious music of the period, and popular songs of the day. In addition, the piano boom of the early 1900s and the financial disposition of African-Americans in Muskogee allowed pianos to proliferate not only the sporting halls and churches, but also

the modest homes of blacksmiths and furniture deliverymen, such as the fathers of Claude Williams and Jay McShann respectively.

### **The 1920-1945: Enduring Racism and World War II**

Muskogee's prosperity dropped off after World War I. Farm failure socked the area hard. As Faulk notes, "Disturbing the economy of the immediate post-war era was the agricultural depression which settled on the United States in 1919 and which would last until the outbreak of World War II" (97). Cotton production overwhelmed any other agricultural product in Muskogee County, and farmers "entered an era of hard times that saw large-scale increases in the number of foreclosed mortgages, sherriff's sales, and tenant farming" (Faulk 97). As noted earlier, the all-black towns around Muskogee suffered tremendously as a result. In addition, a more sinister element of society emerged in the 1920s under the guise of the Ku Klux Klan.

Grant Foreman, in his biography of Muskogee, notes that the Oklahoma Klan was one of the first organized in Oklahoma in February of 1921 (150). The statewide sentiment mushroomed into horror in May of 1921 during the Tulsa Race Riot<sup>7</sup>, an event which Tolson says, "did much to put Oklahoma in the same category as any state in the Deep South" (167). An indication of Muskogee's strong African-American community at that time is represented by Tulsans who sent their children by train to Muskogee as a safe haven during the riots. Safety in Muskogee, however, was a relative term during the ensuing months.

In December of 1921, a black bell-hop, A. G. Holstein, was abducted, whipped and thrown out in front of the Severs Hotel by the Klan for unlisted offenses. On December 4, W.H. Twine verbally attacked the Klan in The Cimiter. The response to W. H. Twine's printed salvos toward the Klan is also reported by Linda Twine. She quotes in full a letter from the "Riders of the Night" and printed in the Muskogee Daily Phoenix, six months after the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, addressed to Twine and his paper's staff, threatening "to

inform the Ku Klux Klan regarding certain things taking place in and around Muskogee, and if they do not take a hand we will. So let that be a warning to you" (40). Twine, out of town on business, replied back through a reporter of The Black Dispatch:

I propose to leave for Muskogee tonight. I have just been handed a copy of the Muskogee Phoenix in which threats have been made against me and my son. . . . I shall continue to fight the Ku Klux Klan and any other un-American movement and organization that I have reason to feel is maintained and created to hamper the progress of the black man. I take full responsibility from what has been published in my paper. The cowardly Klan which now seeks to intimidate me under the guise of another name will find me at my office and my home address in the day and in the night. (Twine 42)

Twine's posturing did not dissuade enrollment by white men and women in the Klan, and may have even served as a catalyst for it. Similar events occurred in northern cities, well documented during "The Harlem Renaissance." Muskogee's African-American community was prosperous, and by all counts doing well after World War I. Claude Williams describes the town during his youth:

It was a pretty good town when it came to business. There was big brickyard and a gin mill. A lot of farmers came in there. At one time the Katy [M, K, & T Railroad] came in there, and the Midland Valley Railroad, and the Frisco. It had all of those coming into Muskogee at one time. My father was a blacksmith at 501 S. Third and right across the street was the Ridenhour (sp) Livery Stable. My father got a lot of business from that and because the horses were always walking on the brick streets and wearing out their shoes. (Appendix B)

Grant Foremen, on the other hand, explains that a sort of "white flight" took place akin to what happened in major American urban centers after the 1950s: "Prior to 1920, many of the town-builders left Muskogee to make their homes in other cities of the state, where they lent their efforts to building those places. From that time, Muskogee added little to

her population" (151). Curiously, however, The Cimiter notes on November 8, 1919, "A great many of our people are coming from Arkansas Texas and other Southern states to locate in Oklahoma and many of them are buying farms." Although most of the farms were destined for failure, perhaps the very increase of African-Americans in the area, along with the declining economy, factored into the departure of some white citizens, and also encouraged the swelling population of the Klan in Oklahoma, which mirrored the Klan's growth across the United States in the 1920s.

West writes that 5,000 Klansmen gathered in the summer of 1922, five miles south of Muskogee, and women "Kluxers" also made a public appearance" (Muskogee 148). By 1923, K.K.K. ceremonials were held at the Muskogee Fairgrounds attracting 2,500 people to initiate 400 new members. Subsequently, two weeks later the governor warned that Muskogee was on the verge of martial law for K.K.K. activities (West Muskogee 158). By 1924, however, "the state legislature passed a public anti-mask law, and the Klan quickly lost influence" (Faulk 101). By 1926, Foreman explains, the Klan, "was soon relegated to the limbo of deservedly forgotten folly" (Muskogee 150). Muskogee's African-American community, however, continued living the follied existence of a thriving economy and internal social structure while being relegated to the embarrassment of segregation. In 1926, for instance, Franklin notes the editor of the Muskogee Weekly Progress complained that "only three cities - Tulsa, Muskogee, and Oklahoma City - had first-class movie facilities for black people" (164).

Again, Claude Williams says as much when he remembers all-Black Muskogee:

I just feel like crying the way they messed up Second Street. Coming down Court Street and Second Street going north, all in there was businesses, pool halls and barber shops and everything. We had so much of our own stuff we didn't have to come into too much contact with the whites, other than the theaters and things was still segregated. Although we had our own theater, the Dreamland. (Appendix B)

Even as rural African-Americans in the area suffered the demise of their "utopian" communities, Muskogee remained a lighthouse for civil rights and African-American owned businesses in the 1920s and 1930s. The predominance of African-Americans in Muskogee is even noted by famous Oklahoma humorist Will Rogers, who in a 1923 column for The New York Times, displays his own prejudices when he writes,

before reaching Claremore, you will pass, even though it's the middle of the day, a place where you think it's night and won't know what is the matter. Well, that's Muskogee, Oklahoma, and this darkness is caused by the color scheme of the population, so put on your headlights and go on in. (Presenting 34)

Given the public sentiments of Rogers, which certainly matched the opinions of many Anglo-Oklahomans, one has to wonder why more African-Americans did not leave the state, when they had been legislated, embarrassed, and bullied out of being in many of the state's cities and counties. Jimmie Lewis Franklin provides the answer. Franklin stresses that one should not associate the lack of mass migration to the North as satisfaction with the racist policies in place in Oklahoma's laws and non-black consciousness (268). Franklin explains, "many of the blacks equipped to leave Oklahoma did not move. A significant reason for the willingness to remain in the state was the attachment to the idea of place" (269). Oklahoma was a state where African-Americans had literally carved out their hopes in the wilderness previously inhabited only by its indigenous people, who were quickly outnumbered and marginalized by the United States government and the waves of land-hungry immigrants into Indian Territory and Oklahoma. Through no fault of their own, African-Americans were brought to the state initially as slaves, and when those slaves were freed in a territory that was not under the United States government's immediate jurisdiction, they established their own society, recruiting their people into it, and were not willing to give it up. Finally, when the state of Oklahoma legislated them out of civic opportunity, they were able to retreat into their own communities. Franklin finds as much when he interviews Mildred Hayes, who grew up in Oklahoma City in the

1930s and 1940s before moving to Washington after high school graduation in 1950.

Franklin writes,

During her childhood, law and order as well as social custom had set her black community apart from whites, and while that had proved disturbing to the young girl, it did not push her toward a strong social activism. . . . Although she found exclusion philosophically unacceptable, the magnetism of a rich black experience and a vibrant black community life had a positive influence on her, and that partly provided a shield in earlier years from the harshness of white bigotry. (266)

Part of that "vibrant" life existed in the music of the 1920s and 1930s, propelled into the national consciousness by Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong in the 1920s, and by the big bands of the 1930s. As a result of Muskogee's previously stated geographical position between Kansas City and Dallas, not to mention its sizable African-American population, the city maintained its importance as a black nexus and performance venue for not only the big names of black entertainment, but for the territory bands which helped create the Kansas City sound.

### **Territory Bands<sup>8</sup>**

The Territory Band era of jazz was vital to the music's rapid development in the 1920s and 1930s. The varied influences of a territory band's sound was comprised of varying elements from vaudeville, dixieland, ragtime, medicine shows, carnivals, brass band marches, and Tin Pan Alley. During the 1920s, jazz experienced success unrivaled since the popularity of ragtime, which peaked in 1909. As a result of the proliferation of radio, phonographs, and generally economic well-being in the United States, the demand for music and people who could play it was high. As we have already seen, Muskogee's environment fostered all of the previously mentioned components of early jazz.

Therefore, its musical community was primed to participate in the territory band era

(Pearson 33-34). While all the sources listed under the above footnote provide solid overviews of the personnel and importance of Oklahoma as a territory band state, only one of them even mentions Muskogee as an important city. Primarily, Muskogee is listed as a town musicians came from or formed bands in, but is not listed as a significant town for the development of the style. It is often a given that Muskogee would be included in territory cities because it was an obvious stopping town between the cities with more population, such as Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Dallas, and Kansas City (Russell Jazz Style 69). Nonetheless, this study will show that Muskogee was a key link in the territory band chain.

According to Schuller, the bands "by definition were black" (Swing 770). Not that there white bands were not playing in the territories, but those bands tended to have more stable, well-paying jobs and did not have to travel as much as the African-American bands. Schuller explains two primary reasons for the development of the groups during the rise of jazz in the 1920s:

the smaller cities and towns began to manifest a demand for dancing to jazz. But since many smaller communities still could not afford a permanent dance hall-even less a permanent orchestra to provide the music - the traveling territory bands came into existence in full force. One should also note that a major surge in the technological development of faster and more economical cars and buses in the 1920s, plus a burgeoning network of paved roads and highways, played a crucial role in the evolution of the bands. (Swing 771)

Muskogee certainly did not fit into the first category of being so small it could not afford a permanent dance hall. Jay McShann remembers how Clarence Love would come into town:

What he would do is if Clarence Love was going to play a dance there on, say, Friday night, he'd come by the school and probably advertised in town, you know, "Dance at the Grand Ballroom, nine until twelve, music by Clarence Love, direct



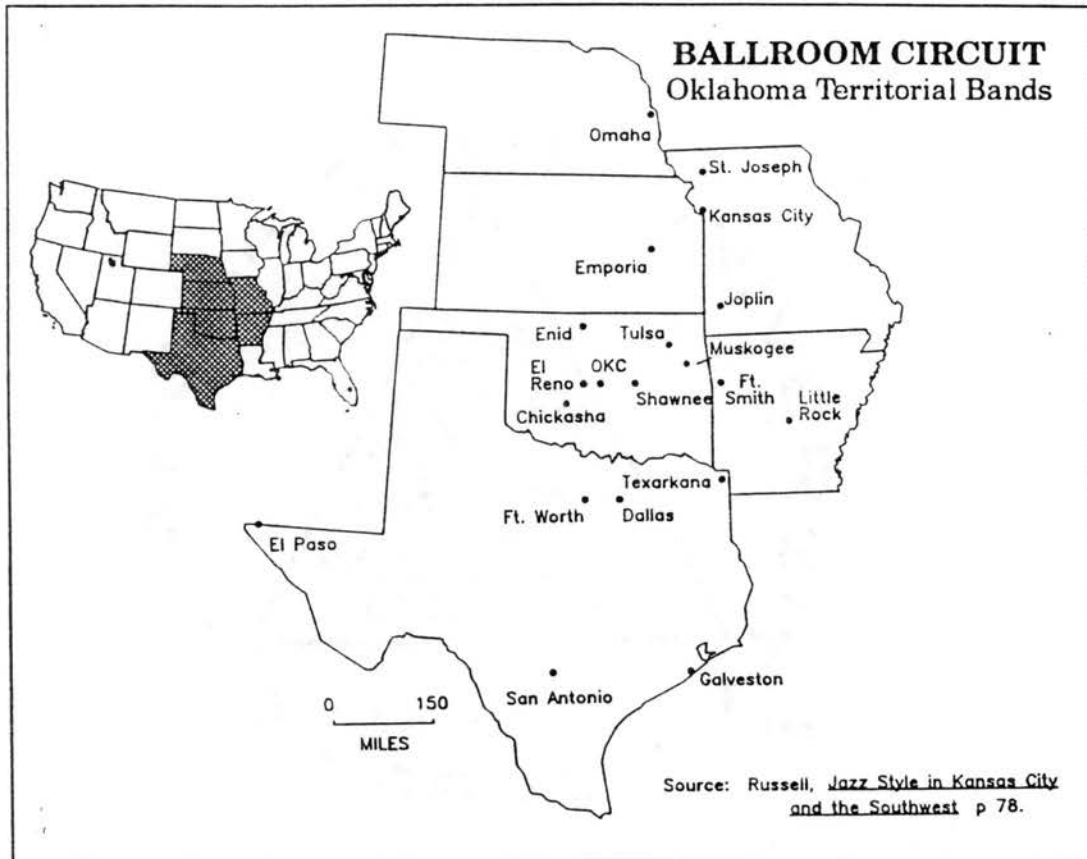


Fig. 13. Ballroom Circuit of Oklahoma Territorial Bands, map courtesy of George O. Carney, "Oklahoma Jazz: Deep Second to 52nd Street." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 72 (1994): 4-21.

from Kansas City." So, Clarence would come in there, because he knew he was going to get some school kids to come to the dance. We'd have an assembly at about 3:30 before school was out. He'd get up and play about three or four tunes and announce, "We're going to have a dance tonight at the Grand Ballroom." Some of those kids had folks that would give them money and they'd go to the dances.

(Appendix D)

In fact, Muskogee had several places where jazz could be heard, as McShann recounts, "In Muskogee, for the black people, we had two [dance halls] on Second Street and two on Main. We had the Wintergarten and a lot of other dance halls" (Brisbin 18). More significantly, perhaps, Muskogee had musicians. Partly due to the era in which they grew up that exposed them to all the precursors of jazz as it happened, but also the economic, religious, social and educational systems in place allowed many young people to become involved in music professionally. The territory bands found both audience and participants in Muskogee, but this fact is often overlooked because of the more dominant regional cities such as Kansas City and Dallas. Muskogee contributed significantly to the territory bands with its best musicians, which, ultimately propelled many of Muskogee's musicians into the regional spotlight and gave them valuable experience before they joined national bands. Claude Williams tells about the group he joined up with in 1925:

This show came through Muskogee called T.O.B.A. at the theater right there on Second Street right next to the Elliot Building. Barney Kessel's mother and father had a shoe store right there on Second Street. I used to go down there in later years and Barney was playing around there with my brother-in-law and he'd give me his guitar. You know, I taught him this stuff on guitar. He won't say nothing about that because he done got to be one of the world's top jazz guitarists. This cat was named Kid Thomas and His Jazz Babies. He had about three girls dancing in a chorus line. We jumped from Muskogee to Hot Springs, and then from Hot Springs we played all up and down Arkansas, Little Rock, Baxter, and a bunch of

little towns. (Appendix B)

This on-the-job training, however, proved to be the territory bands undoing, as once a musician became a top-notch player, rival and better funded orchestras would take the musicians away, which prevented many of the orchestras from developing a real signature sound (Schuller, Swing 772-73). The bands who were able to rise above the perfunctory status were operating out of the Southwest, as Schuller explains, "Some of the most distinctive and exciting territory bands were those that roamed the great Southwest-Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico" (Schuller, Swing 798.) Albert McCarthy, author of Big Band Jazz, displays Muskogee's significance in the area as early as 1923 by explaining that Alphonso Trent, who in McCarthy's opinion led the greatest territory band, fronted a band for the first time in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

Nathan Pearson's interview with Torrence "T" Holder provides important information about Muskogee's early jazz scene in the 1920s. Holder remembers, "I started out with Ida Cox, the blues singer. I was in Muskogee, and Ida Cox was there, and Fletcher Henderson had to get a band for her so they was around town trying to find musicians" (15). Holder's memories illustrate the notion of bandleaders putting together groups in Muskogee, the same way Alphonso Trent did. Holder also explains some of the circuit they played:

We'd play all around. Do a dance, go on into Ft. Smith [Arkansas]. Ft. Smith was kind of a headquarters for us. [Then] we'd come up here [Muskogee] and play a dance. Then we'd go to Tulsa, play a dance. Then we'd play Oklahoma City.

Then we'd go back home and count our money. (44)

Holder was very much a part of the territory band sound that Schuller defines as "more distinctive and unified in conception and style than any other. That is the collection of bands that ranged through the Southwest, from Texas to Kansas City" (804). Of course, the road from Texas to Kansas City followed the same path as the M, K, & T, and that was through Muskogee. Schuller also explains what makes the region unique from others:

... it was the only [region] to develop a major original, broad-based (rather than regional) orchestral concept. Interestingly enough, that concept evolved out of elements which, with the exception of the New Orleans style, *were entirely indigenous to the region*. And what bound that style together was the blues.

Whatever individual characteristics a band or group (or player) might possess, they were invariably founded on the bedrock of the blues: its mood, its tone, its feeling, its throb, and its rootedness in everyday life. (Swing 804)

If "T" Holder's start with Ida Cox were not enough to solidify blues as style in the area, Peter Guralnick, in his book about Delta blues man Robert Johnson, Searching for Robert Johnson, places the elusive Johnson in the nearby all-black town of Taft performing his "Terraplane Blues" (34). Indeed, the blues permeated the area and air, with the depression closing farms, all-black towns failing, the migration of friends and family out of the area, and racism all around. Ultimately, Schuller proposes the blues-soaked territory band style became a national style through the music of Count Basie, and to a certain extent, Charlie Parker (Swing 804), whose professional breakthrough came playing in the blues-based big band led by Muskogee's Jay McShann; McShann himself learned to "complement the blues" by playing dances with his Manual Training High School bandmaster. Manual Training and its bandmaster, Boston Russell, are talked about by McShann, Claude Williams, and Aaron Bell as a primary influence on the musicians who grew up in the Manual Training music program. Williams explains that Russell had a brass band at Manual and was a good teacher. Not only the schooling of Muskogee musicians was important, but the range of influences prevalent in Oklahoma apparently gave the musicians a wider range. As Williams remembers,

After I got here in Kansas City, different cats would come up from down south and they seemed to be hip to different types of music. Like we'd play a song and the musicians here would know the right changes and were a little more advanced in music. The boys from down there was good musicians and everything, but a little

different. . . . Most of them could read good because they taught that when Boston Russell had the band. He must have been a pretty good teacher because the different musicians who came from down there seemed to know their instrument and could play good. Most of them that come from there seem to become top musicians. (Appendix B).

Williams validates both the music education and the multiple influences to which musicians from Oklahoma and Muskogee were exposed, and the various styles they were able to play. (As mentioned earlier, the one thing that the four most successful Muskogee musicians have in common is their ability to crossover from one genre to another.)

As the first generation of musicians left Muskogee at the end of the 1920s, heading for the more active environment of Kansas City, the rural area around Muskogee slipped into the depression that much of the United States experienced during the 1930s. As a result of its continued importance as a mercantile, transportation, and federal government center, the city remained the area's second major municipality, after its oil rich neighbor Tulsa. While musicians may have surged from the city and region, along with the rest of the country, the state's social policies prevented any wide scale change in Muskogee until changes were legislated by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1940s and 50s. Muskogee continued its tradition of activism in the 1930s.

Apparently, the indignation and civic action championed by Muskogee's early African-American leaders still existed in 1938. Smallwood describes how the community responded to perceived unfairness that year: "Muskogee blacks stopped a local school bond issue because the money would have been used exclusively for white schools" (60). Muskogee was still a place where African-Americans believed they had a voice in the municipal government. The city was also in good enough shape to support at least one consistent African-American led band, Ellis Ezell's orchestra in which the fourteen-year-old guitarist, Barney Kessel, played; and, as noted in the critical surveys of this dissertation, Kessel is widely considered one of the best improvisationists in jazz. He left

the city in 1938 for better opportunities in Stillwater and Norman, before heading to California in 1939. Bassist Aaron Bell also matured in the 1930s before he left for Xavier University in New Orleans after high school, and subsequently returned to lead Manual Training High School's band (Appendix F). During that period, Muskogee boasted of the state's largest department store for blacks before 1940, employing about twenty-five people (Franklin 97). Muskogee was the area's retail exchange for rural blacks prior to World War II, and, to some extent, still is today. DC Minner, the Oklahoma blues man who was inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame in 1999, remembers his grandmother going to Muskogee to supply her juke joint in Rentiesville in the late 1930s and 1940s, as well as promote gospel singing conventions:<sup>9</sup>

We used to go to Muskogee. It was a big town. We went there to get supplies we couldn't get in Rentiesville or Checotah, the next largest town. It was the highlight of the week to go to Muskogee, going on Saturday. You could get a better deal in Muskogee. My grandmother would need to go to the packing house in Muskogee to buy wholesale meats so she could sell them at her joint . . . My grandmother [also] promoted spiritual events up there in Muskogee. Get those big famous spiritual singers in from all over the country, like the Soul Stirrers Quartet. . . . There would be buses coming from Fort Gibson and from all the little black communities around Muskogee like Red Bird and Tullahassee. That would be a big thing happening in Muskogee in the 40s. (Carney and Foley 42)

According to the WPA Guide, by 1941 the "[Negro population] amounts to 24 percent of the total . . . and they have provided for themselves schools, churches, amusement places, apartment houses, and clubs. Indeed, 1941 began the last surge of Muskogee's population when the United States entered World War II and Muskogee's location as a railroad shipping center and flight training area encouraged the establishment of Camp Gruber, a military training facility and prisoner of war camp, which 12,000 people began constructing in February of 1942. In addition, the camp itself has a musical connection, as

it was named after Brigadier General Edmund Gruber, composer of "The Caisson Song." Naturally, Muskogee became "a home away from home for the Camp Gruber soldiers. Victory Bus Lines provided transportation between Muskogee and the camp. A round trip fare cost 61 cents" (Allen 2-4). And, although troops could travel into Muskogee and hear quality music performed by musicians who had chosen Muskogee as their home, the major stars had long departed for Kansas City or the East and West coasts. That did not stop legendary record producer and critic John Hammond from trying to dig up musicians when he found himself stationed at Camp Gruber in a ski-troop outfit.

John Hammond was an important figure in the history of jazz. New York born and Yale educated, Hammond produced and recorded important sessions with Fletcher Henderson, Benny Goodman, and Benny Carter. He was also the catalyst for the Count Basie orchestra's early success, after replacing Muskogean Claude Williams with Benny Green in 1937, as noted in the critical study of Williams. Hammond furthered the careers of Charlie Christian, whom he teamed with Benny Goodman, as well as the careers of George Benson, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Hammond also insured Aaron Bell would record with many of the biggest stars in 1950s jazz on the Vanguard label. As the Grove Encyclopedia notes, he was "A tireless talent scout and champion of racial equality" (Kernfeld 476).

For all those reasons, his depiction of Muskogee in 1945 is an important perspective on the end of Muskogee's productive jazz scene. Hammond writes, "Muskogee, Oklahoma, was always a fascinating place for me because I had known several good musicians who came from there" (258). Hammond mentions Lee Wiley, even though she is from Fort Gibson, Aaron Bell, Barney Kessel, and Hobart Banks, a pianist he had heard with the Ernie Fields Orchestra and wanted to find in Muskogee. He drove into town and discovered a dance would be happening at the American Legion Hall. Hammond remembers, "[The dance] was for whites, but playing the music was a five-piece Negro band, with Claude Williams, the violin-playing guitarist I had replaced in the Basie Band.

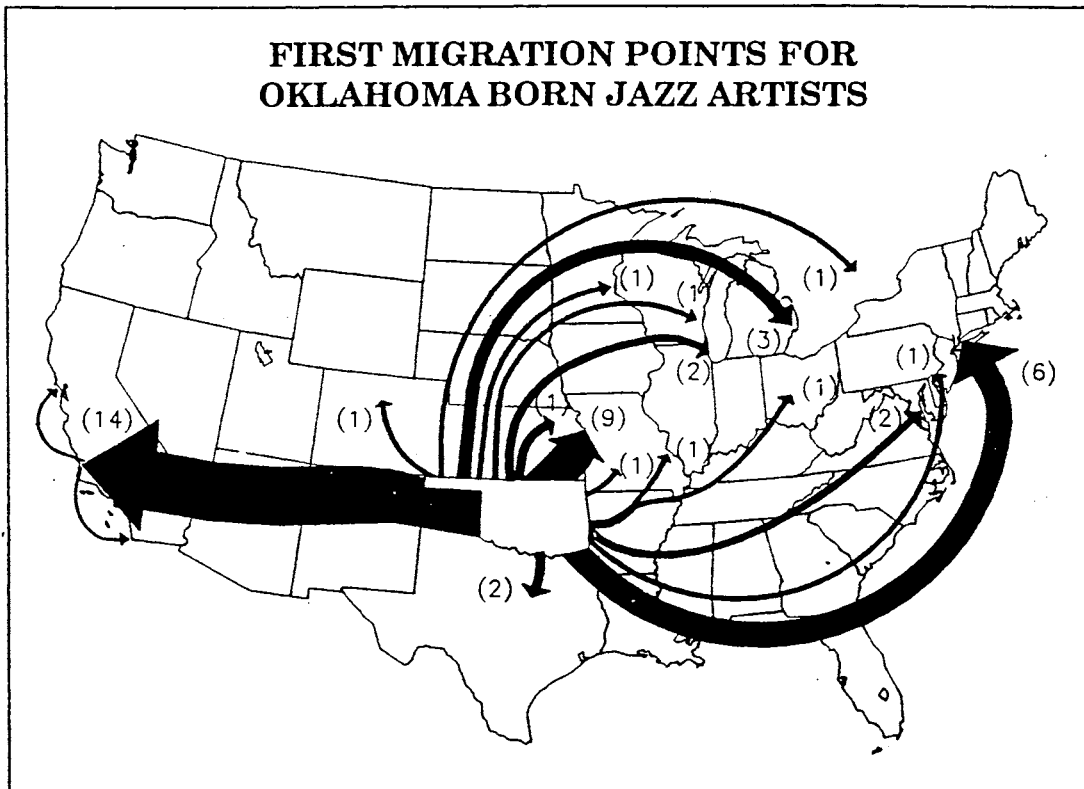


Fig. 14. First Migration Points for Oklahoma Jazz Artists, map courtesy of George O. Carney, "Oklahoma Jazz: Deep Second to 52nd Street." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 72 (1994): 4-21.



Claude seemed to bear me no ill will" (258). Hobart Banks was playing piano, and Banks and Williams told Hammond he should go to the "Negro dance hall, where Sonny Boy Williams was appearing with a six-piece band" (258). Hammond took the tip and went to the African-American section of town, not knowing anything about any segregated areas or Army rules against going into them. Hammond says, "I walked up three flights of stairs to the dance hall and stood beside the bandstand having a fine time. It was not a very good band, but it was entertaining enough" (258-59). Hammond's expertise can not easily be discounted, and he may have been describing the very end of the viability of Muskogee's jazz music scene. Claude Williams was back playing in his hometown with Hobart Banks, a piano player who decided to stay with his family instead of going on the road.<sup>10</sup> However, Hammond also found about race relations in Muskogee, or at least how white soldiers going into a black dance club was perceived even by the club's own employee:

Suddenly the room was filled with military police. It seemed that the man taking tickets downstairs had been frightened by the sight of four white soldiers and had called the MP's to get us out. No one knew me. We were taken in a patrol wagon to the Muskogee Jail, where we were questioned by a burly MP from South Carolina. I knew nothing about off-limits regulations, I did know by 1945 that there could no longer be racial reasons for such restrictions. (259)

Hammond had obviously not read up on Muskogee's history before he was stationed at Gruber, a place he equates with the next place he was transferred to: "Another Godforsaken Southern camp" (259). Hammond's observations are significant and really are the last significant mentions of jazz in Muskogee. Even though Muskogee's Don Byas had been doing groundbreaking work in bebop with Dizzy Gillespie in the early 1940s, and Barney Kessel's best years were still come, Muskogee did not continue its production of jazz artists after World War II. The Twine family did send one more musician, Linda Twine, born in Muskogee in 1947, off to success in New York as one of a "handful of

women conductors working in the theater in the 1980s" (Handy 509). Twine received national acclaim as the conductor for a sixteen-piece orchestra for Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music, which, according to Handy in her book Black Conductors, ran "more than two years on Broadway, enjoying a seven-week run in Los Angeles, followed by a national tour" (509). Also on Twine's list of accomplishments are music director/conductor positions for such notable Broadway shows as The Wiz, Ain't Misbehavin', and Jelly's Last Jam. She has also been a guest conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonic and Richmond Symphony, and worked as a conductor/pianist for Sammy Davis, The Persuasions, Leslie Uggams, and Barry White. Linda Twine is the most significant African-American musician to come out of Muskogee since World War II, and clearly her own legacy is related to the rich history of the city.

If jazz is considered America's classical music, then Muskogee must be considered as one of the places in which it not only flourished, but took shape out of the multi-cultural influences from the time of its early exploration and settlement by a varied assortment of American Indians, Europeans, and Africans. Therefore, along with the other previously mentioned cities in the American Southwest, the sound of jazz in 1920s Muskogee, Oklahoma, became the national sound of jazz in the 1930s, as represented by the great swing bands of that period. Subsequently, some of the musicians from that era evolved into some of the titans of 20th century jazz.

The reason for this fertile garden of musicians lies in the strength of Muskogee's historic African-American population, founded on the opportunities presented to it in the last half of the 19th century, wherein it established strongholds in which its citizens could flourish socially, intellectually, spiritually, and artistically. Aside from the American Indian art produced in the city over the last century, all indications point to the fact that jazz is the most important cultural product the city has manifested, and has only recently been acknowledged by organizations such as the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame and the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame. Muskogee, Oklahoma's African-American cultural and

historical picture is often overlooked in the broader picture of national and even regional jazz and civil rights history. Certainly, Oklahoma's all-Black towns have received respectful attention, but the hub of Indian Territory's African-American population has not, neither as a hot coal in America's jazz furnace nor as a primary civil rights training ground in African-American history. Hopefully, this study will inspire others to provide a more detailed picture of not only that history's tremendous contributions to American jazz, but also to contemporary African-American consciousness, and to the collective conscience of us all.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As noted in Barney Kessel's oral history, one "cobbler" address was across the street from South Second Street's theater for African-Americans, and the other one, just a block south, doubled as the Kessel residence and was two doors down from the Convention Hall, in turn referred to as the Grand Hall by Jay McShann in his interview.

<sup>2</sup> For a good explanation of the early jazz period, as well as placing Jelly Roll Morton in Indian Territory circa 1902 - 1917, see Gioia History.

<sup>3</sup> For complete details of the enrollment and allotment process, and its ramifications for the Muscogee, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole, see Debo's And Still the Waters Run.

<sup>4</sup> For complete wording of the separate coach and facilities law that began the Oklahoma segregation period, see General Statutes of Oklahoma 1908, Art. 2, sec. 5955-5964.

<sup>5</sup> Biggers was a stenographer. For a complete biography of C. A. Biggers, see The Muskogee Cimiter, Jan. 3, 1909: 1.

<sup>6</sup> W. A. Rentie was one of Muskogee's African-American leaders and a founder of the all-black town, Rentiesville, about 28 miles south of Muskogee, and eventual home of noted historian John Hope Franklin and blues artist DC Minner.

<sup>7</sup> For oral histories, substantive interpretations, and research resources about the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 see Gates, They Came Searching.

<sup>8</sup> For tremendously detailed overviews of the Territory Band era see Schuller, The Swing Era, 770-805; Pearson, Goin' to Kansas City, 33-53; Russell, Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest, 53-73; McCarthy, Big Band Jazz, 88-181.

<sup>9</sup> See DC Minner's interview in Living Blues (Carney and Foley) for details about early blues men in the area, Minner's personal history, and the evolution of the Dusk 'til Dawn Blues Festival, ongoing as of 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Both Barney Kessel and Jay McShann speak highly of Hobart Banks in their oral histories (Appendixes D, E, G, H).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CLAUDE "FIDDLER" WILLIAMS: FROM WHITES ONLY TO THE WHITE HOUSE

The career of Claude "Fiddler" Williams, born February 22, 1908, in Muskogee, Oklahoma, "spans the entire history of jazz" (Haddix 34). Although Williams suffered early professional setbacks, such as being replaced by John Hammond in the Count Basie Orchestra on the eve of that band's national success in 1937, he has outlived all of his detractors to enjoy status as one of the premier jazz violinists of the 20th -- and now -- 21st century. He continues performing and recording actively as of 2000. Jazz critic Colin Larkin proclaims Williams "a gutsy violinist with an energetic, swinging style" but also notes "[he] has rarely attracted the attention he deserves" (911). That deserved attention has been slowly forthcoming, for this important musician who is the primary living proponent of the jazz string band tradition, and whose career traverses nearly the entire 20th century.

As Williams explains in his oral history, he grew up in Muskogee and learned piano by ear through playing with his older brother (Appendix A). At 10, he began playing mandolin with his brother-in-law's string band in the hotels and barber shops in Muskogee and surrounding towns. Haddix writes of the material Williams played with his brother-in-law's band, "Their material consisted of ragtime, popular standards, and blues" (32). Of course, these ingredients form a large part of jazz's nucleus. Williams switched to violin upon hearing a Joe Venuti concert in Muskogee, and Venuti is often cited as making a giant impression on Williams. Chris Sheridan is no exception when he writes, "Williams's fluent style has been influenced chiefly by the work of Joe Venuti" (622). The interesting aspect about the concert that is always left untold in Williams' multitude of interviews about his life is that because he was African-American, he and his family were not allowed into the park where Venuti played. Williams heard the music over and above the bushes, without amplification, which convinced him he wanted to play the ubiquitous instrument of the 19th century American west. In addition, showing the economic stability of the

Williams family, "the next day when I got home from school, there was the fiddle," Williams remembers (Haddix 32).

After apprenticing with his brother-and-law's string band, and other traveling groups who would come through town and pick him up for area engagements, Williams played with the Pettiford Family Band, although the great bassist Oscar Pettiford was only an infant at the time, and went on the road with a traveling variety show called Kid Thomas and His Jazz Babies. By the time he was 19, in 1927, Williams joined Torrence Holder's territory band in Muskogee, which became the Clouds of Joy under the leadership of Andy Kirk when "T" Holder ran into money troubles. The Clouds of Joy were one of the leading territory bands of the area, playing in Kansas City in 1929 and recording for the Brunswick label, on which Williams makes appearances on fiddle. After recording, the group began touring the East Coast. Although he played banjo and violin in the Clouds of Joy, Kirk wanted Williams to focus more on guitar, which Williams did not want to do, but when Williams hurt his leg during a string of one-night stands, Kirk left Williams behind, calling Williams' wife to let her know where to send for him (Haddix 34).

Back in Kansas City, Williams played fiddle with bassist Eddie Cole, whose brother, Nat, was featured on piano (Haddix 34). In Rodger Harris's oral history of Claude Williams in this study, Williams describes how he left the group when jobs started to slow down with the Cole brothers. After leaving the Coles, Williams went back to Chicago where Count Basie sent for him to join that orchestra in 1936. Williams only played on one recording session for Basie in 1937,<sup>1</sup> before John Hammond replaced him with Freddie Green, who would stay with Basie for fifty years.

Different accounts exist for why Hammond replaced Williams. First, Hammond explains, "Claude Williams . . . played wonderful guitar and an excruciating violin. Claude loved to play his violin, in those days still a rare instrument in jazz played well only by Joe Venuti and Stuff Smith. Basie loved Claude Williams and willingly, if ill-advisedly, put up with his violin" (173). As explained earlier, Hammond was a well-respected

producer and talent scout, and it was his "prime objective" to replace Claude Williams. Hammond remembers, "Dropping Claude nearly broke Basie's heart, but [Freddie] Green was too great to pass up" (177).<sup>2</sup>

Claude Williams tells his own side of the story in various interviews since his career's resurgence since the early 1970s. In 1999, Williams tells Down Beat reporter Chuck Haddix that Hammond had been pushing the Basie group to do too much too fast. Williams recalls a big band competition before the band left Kansas City, when Hammond arranged a big band battle with Duke Ellington. Williams says, "Duke Ellington blew us out of the other side of the hall because we didn't have arrangements. All of Basie's arrangements were for nine pieces, not a 12-piece band, so we had to play head arrangements. The band wasn't ready" (34). However, as we know from Hammond, he was going to have the band ready by bringing in the players he wanted. Shortly after the band's debut in New York and after one recording session, several members of the group received their notice. Williams tells Haddix, "It had nothing to do with my playing. Hammond didn't want a soloist in the rhythm section. Every time I would play the fiddle, there would be big applause" (34). Late into the 1970s, Williams obviously still hurt from the experience when he tells one interviewer, "I was so surprised. I was number one in the Down Beat Poll on guitar that year. They say that John Hammond had some of his New York boys, [and he] had promised to put them in one of his bands" (Yanow 19). He tells another interviewer, "I was rather disgusted when I got my notice. . . I told a friend of mine, Claude Jones, 'Man, I got my notice.' [He said], 'You what? Nobody can fill your spot.' [I said], 'Somebody gonna fill it, got my notice in my pocket'" (Becker 8). Interestingly, no account of the incident is given in Basie's biography by Stanley Dance. Schuller, from his musician's perspective, says the move "helped to solidify the Basie rhythm section and make it one virtually unparalleled" (Swing 237). Williams disagrees, saying, "I probably wouldn't be playing fiddle now hardly at all. I was just playing guitar. I was on top of rhythm guitar 'cause I could, oh, read anything that they put out there.

That is when, in fact, anybody should say Count had the best rhythm section he ever had. 'Cause Freddie Green took my place and he couldn't quite fill my spot" (Becker 11). Michael Schlesinger, in the liner notes to the Williams and Stewart release, Jazz Violin and Guitar Duets, explains another reason: "Williams commitment to the fiddle put him at odds with the emerging Basie sound which relied more heavily on the tenor saxophone." Patrick Butters, in a Washington Times review, says Williams pioneered the soloist's role even before . . . the great Freddie Green." Butters also writes, "A fine example of Mr. Williams' guitar is on MCA's three-CD late-'30s Basie collection, The Original MCA Recordings." Nonetheless, Williams was out of the band and almost dropped out of sight.

After being released from the Basie orchestra, Williams returned to Kansas City where he started a string band that was a fairly successful live draw, but did not record (Haddix 34). Subsequently, Williams moved to Flint, Michigan where he stayed until being called up for service during World War II. Afterwards, Sheridan details Williams' path in less than glorious terms, "Williams worked in obscurity as a guitarist in Michigan (in the 1940s), as a member of the rhythm-and-blues band of Roy Milton (in the early 1950s), and in Kansas City (from the mid 1950s)" (622). As usual, in the biographical information up until the last third of the 20th century, very little critical observations of Williams' playing exists. However, Schlesinger does note an undated Variety review of the Austin Powell Quintet, with whom Williams played from the late 40s through at least 1951. The reviewer mentions, "Electric guitarist doubles on an electric violin for some hot swing fiddling. Combo is suitable for jivey locations." Certainly, by 1960 Williams had dropped off the jazz map, as Leonard Feather does not include him at all in his Encyclopedia of Jazz from that year. During the 1960s, Williams played primarily unnoticed in groups around Kansas City until he began playing and recording with fellow Muskogean Jay McShann.

As noted in the Penguin Guide to Jazz, "Williams seemed to be destined to be a very modest footnote in jazz history, until, in his sixties, he began working with Jay McShann"



(Cook 1146). Cook and Martin call McShann's The Man from Muskogee, on which Williams is featured prominently, "perhaps Williams' happiest record" (1146). Ultimately, the two parted ways in the late 1970s over the same "old deal," as Williams explains, "We were playing in Lincoln, Nebraska, at an American Legion Hall, when someone in the audience didn't care for my fiddle playing and asked Jay to tell me to hold the fiddle down. Jay asked me to just play guitar and I quit on the spot" (Haddix 34). Williams seems to have fought an uphill battle throughout the 1900s to keep his fiddle in the jazz mix. Schlesinger quotes an undated article in Frets magazine, which observes, "... strangely Claude's contributions have gone largely unrecognized. Since he is literally one of the fathers of jazz violin, the fact that he has such a limited discography of mostly unavailable recordings is a total mystery." Schlesinger then gives a summary of Williams playing:

His violin arrangements could be more accurately described as "heart arrangements" rather than "head arrangements." The quality of the blues permeates Williams' playing and both lyricism and drive can be found in his music. At one point a phrase can be formed by several economic swipes of the bow while the next time around that same phrase will be broken into a cascade of notes containing variations on melody and striking chordal diminutions. (Liner Notes)

Williams' playing became appreciated more and more throughout the 1970s and 1980s because of his obvious connection to the string band tradition and territory bands, which makes him a rather romantic figure. During that period, he performed at numerous major festivals in the United States and overseas. Interestingly, to show his range and further demonstrating the part of the country from which he came, in 1982 Williams was featured with the Johnnie Lee Wills Western Swing Band at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. Subsequently, he played in the Broadway production of Black and Blue, along with continuing a constant schedule of touring, performing and recording. In 1987, more of his oral history is documented in Pearson's Goin to Kansas City, in which Williams talks about his childhood, musical education, playing in vaudeville, and bands

with whom he played (252). The 1980s concluded with Williams being the first inductee into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and also began a spate of reviews touting his abilities. According to a press kit from Williams' agent, Russ Dantzler who is based in New York City, on February 7, 1989, The New York Times reviewed Williams' Carnegie Hall performance by saying he "capped the evening with an engaging, dignified flash," and called a 1990 performance "Jazz at its best" in a March 4, 1990 club review. Critic Scott Yanow, in The All Music Guide to Jazz, notes that Williams is in "top form" on 1989's two live discs Live at J's, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2, and "His violin solos are excellent (a little rougher in tone but near the level of Stephane Grappelli," while his "vocals show plenty of personality" (All 1175.)

Since 1990, Williams has received more critical attention than he has in his entire life. According to press materials, Williams has been featured on the network television program CBS News Sunday Morning, played Carnegie Hall twice, and opened Lincoln Center's Kansas City Swing and Shout even with his trio. Williams performed for President Clinton's first inaugural, and toured Australia. The two previously mentioned compact discs, Claude Williams, Live at J's, Volumes 1 & 2, placed on Best of 1994 jazz critics' polls, in the Village Voice and Pulse!. In 1994 and 1995, his live recording aired on National Public Radio's Jazz Set and he toured twenty three cities headlining a Masters of the Folk Violin tour. Yanow also notes that Williams' 1994 release, Swingtime in New York, also shows the 86-year-old violinist is "still in his musical prime" (All 1175).

The Austin American-Statesman touted Williams "one of three of four vital jazz violinists," in 1995, and when in his presence, "[you] can't help but feel you are in the presence of greatness" (Riemenschneider). On September 4, 1995, The Los Angeles Times reviews Williams as "one of the small select company who gave the [fiddle] a secure place in jazz. His wizard fingering, rousing double-stops and lyrical inventions helped bring standing ovations . . . it is the history of jazz, on the hoof, alive and timelessly fresh" (qtd. in Dantzler). On July 2, 1996, in a New York Times JVC concert review,

Williams is described as making the violin "a smooth-talking tease, sly and ebullient, with phrases that sounded like classy, witty wolf whistles" (qtd. in Dantzler). On Williams' 1996 release, King of Kansas City, the "apparently ageless violinist . . . has rarely sounded better, and he is remarkably youthful throughout" (Yanow, All 1176).

1997 continued Williams' success and accolades. He celebrated his 89th birthday in Washington D. C. educating and entertaining students at the Smithsonian by day and playing with a trio at night to great reviews, such as this one on February 21 in the Washington Post:

For jazz violinist Claude Williams, age is no object and certainly no obstacle. Though he'll celebrate his 89th birthday while performing in Washington this weekend, his brand of Kansas City-bred swing, blues and balladry remains forever young . . . Williams [is] the session's real spark plug, playing with infectious spirit as he cut a wide swath through decades of swing, blues and pop . . . Williams doesn't fiddle around when it comes time to infuse the romantic melody with a contagious swing pulse. (Joyce: D1)

Along with his successes around the United States and abroad, his hometown honored Claude Williams in 1997 by making him one of the first inductees into the newly formed Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Williams was inducted with three other giants of American music, whose roots are in Oklahoma: Woody Guthrie, Patti Page, and Merle Haggard. In 1998, Williams performed at the White House, the recording of which was subsequently featured in a Public Broadcasting System special.

In 1999, Williams was the first installment in Down Beat's First Person Project, which attempts to round up jazz's elder statesmen for a history of the music in their own words (Haddix 34). Although only two pages with two photographs, the article signals the permanent return and historical significance of the man who was written out of jazz history in 1937 when he was given his notice to leave the Count Basie Orchestra. By year's end, the then-91-year-old, toured consistently, stopping at Oklahoma State

University on September 16 for a day in classes with students and a concert that night. Claude Williams has come to be one of a handful of jazz violin proponents. However, he is more than an icon; his playing resounds with the the foundations of jazz, which he absorbed in Muskogee. As Schlesinger notes, "Williams, because he has stuck with the fiddle these many years has continued to refine his technique and broaden his repertoire. There is no hint of a moldy fig to be found here" (Liner notes). His longevity is his last laugh at John Hammond.

For the yearning, sweet sound of Claude Williams' fiddle, listen to his composition "Fiddler's Dream" on Claude Williams Live at J's Part 2. The first notes he strikes are long, mournful blue notes, not unlike the sounds heard on the Muskogee (Creek) hymn recording heard on the disc included here (Track 1). Then, Williams proceeds to establish the head riff, or the guiding theme of the tune, before cascading through improvisations on the blues, which ultimately adds up to jazz. Williams exemplifies many elements of the 19th and 20th century African-American musical tradition with his playing -- the haunting and sad melodies of the blues, as well as the spritely nature of the early 20th century string bands that mirrored the evolution of dixieland, and, finally, the harmonic improvisations on a blues theme which is at the foundation of jazz.

The violin is not often thought of as a contemporary jazz instrument outside of the legendary Stephane Grappelli, however, Claude Williams may be solely responsible for raising the consciousness of it at the end of the 20th century, and establishing it as a fixture from the year 2000. His resurrection of the early string band style, of which he has been a player since he was 10-years-old in Muskogee, is testament both to his tremendous abilities and the hotbed of jazz from which he came, Muskogee, Oklahoma.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A detailed lineup of this recording session includes such jazz luminaries as Lester Young, Jimmy Rushing, Buck Clayton, Walter Page, and Basie, as well as Williams (Rust 101).

<sup>2</sup> While in Tulsa to play with a touring performance group, Count Basie first heard the important territory group, the Oklahoma City Blue Devils, whom he later joined. The remnants of that group became the Bennie Moten Orchestra, and, subsequently, the Count Basie Orchestra. For more information on Basie's connections to Oklahoma, see Dance, The World of Count Basie (13, 19-25).

## CHAPTER SIX

### DON BYAS: FROM SWING TO BEBOP

The "sublimely melodic" Don Byas (Feather Jazz Years 107) was born Carlos Wesley Byas in Muskogee, Oklahoma October 21, 1912, and is not only thought of as one of the greatest tenor saxophonists of the 20th century, but is also considered to be one of the few musicians who was able to cross the bridge from the swing era of the 1920s and 30s, to the bebop period of the 1940s<sup>1</sup>. If we accept Russell's argument about bebop being the progeny of the Kansas City "riff" style, of which Don Byas is in part a product, it should come as no surprise for Byas to be considered one of the more important saxophone players of 20th-century jazz. Although eternally linked with the saxophonist to whom he is most often linked - Coleman Hawkins <sup>2</sup>, and Kansas City native Charlie Parker, Byas will always be thought of as a premier 20th century jazz musician . As jazz critic Scott Yanow notes in the All Music Guide to Jazz, Byas is "one of the greatest of all tenor players . . . but his decision to move permanently to Europe in 1946 has resulted in him being vastly underrated in jazz history books" (164).

After playing as a teenager in his own groups around Muskogee, in which Jay McShann had his first professional job, Byas toured with the most influential territory bands of the Southwest, i.e., Walter Pages's Blue Devils from Oklahoma City, Bennie Moten out of Kansas City, and a group led by transplanted Muskogeeite Torrence Holder called the Dark Clouds of Joy. Before becoming part of the national scene and one of the primary originators of bebop in New York City, Byas formed his own group while in college at Langston University, the historically African-American university in Langston, Oklahoma, another one of Oklahoma's all-Black towns. (Chilton 57-8). In the 1930s, when he changed from alto to tenor saxophone, Byas played with some of the West Coast's biggest orchestras, to include Lionel Hampton (1935) and Buck Clayton (1936) before heading to Kansas City to join up with Andy Kirk and his Mighty Clouds of Joy (1939-40) (Owens 176).

In Kansas City, Byas became part of the now legendary jam session scene that would go all night long and, ultimately, by most critics' opinions, where Byas's style developed in relation to Coleman Hawkins. Guitarist Eddie Durham remembers a night when Ben Webster, with whom Byas is also connected critically<sup>3</sup>, Coleman Hawkins and Byas had a battle of the tenor saxophones: "They started at eight o'clock and they finished at eight o'clock the next morning. They used about five or six piano players" (qtd. in Pearson 80). Jazz critics often explain Don Byas in the context of Hawkins, who was eleven years older than Byas and had been playing professionally since age 16 in Kansas City. Hawkins was obviously a mentor for Byas, however, the difficulty is in reaching a consensus on just what the relationship between the two is. Whereas the previously mentioned critics just place Byas in the Hawkins tradition and leave it at that, others are not willing to go so quietly. McRae writes, "[Byas's] full tone was ideal for his romantic approach to improvisation, although he did employ more oblique note placings than was normal in the Coleman Hawkins school" (104). Priestley refers to him as "the" tenor player of the period surpassing concurrent work by both Hawkins and Lester Young ("Byas" 70). The style is one of the reasons Byas was able to fit in with the new generation of beboppers who felt the basic big band formulas in which they had been forced to operate were stifling and bereft of creative allowances. Burns also takes the offensive on Byas's behalf by saying Byas has his own style while being indebted to Hawkins. "[Byas] is far more lithe than Hawkins at uptempo, and the tone of instrument harder," says Burns who recalls a story Byas once told about Charlie Parker getting Byas out of bed to jam because "I was the only one who could play fast enough" (qtd. in Burns 5). Poet and sometimes jazz critic Philip Larkin also sticks up for Byas when he writes of a 1964 recording: "Byas plays the easy Hawkins-derived tenor for which he is famous, but lighter and less turgid than Hawk is on occasion" (144). Scott Yanow explains Byas's "knowledge of chords rivalled Coleman Hawkins and, due to their similarity in tones, Byas can be considered an extension of the elder tenor" (164). Gitler feels Byas played "a big creamy version of the

Hawkins sound" by 1941 when he moved to New York to play in the Count Basie Orchestra as Lester Young's replacement for the years of 1941 to 1943 ("Dexter" 221). It was then he recorded "Harvard Blues" with the Basie band, the song most widely used in connecting Byas's input to Basie and the changing style of jazz at that time (Basie 251).

Byas's solo on "Harvard Blues" practically set the standard for smooth saxophonists of the 1940s. Brask writes, "[the] velvety tone and sinuous phrasing . . . was one of those solos which immediately enter the repertoire of the instrument" (165). Balliet calls the solo still "among the great blues statements" and, in his opinion, "the tone outswells Hawkins's" with its "unique and insinuating legato quality" (Night 130). Gunther Schuller, the classical composer and noted jazz scholar, is so enamored with the Byas solo that opens the record, which Schuller calls "flawless," and says the recording is one of the early Basie band's best ("Quintessence" 254-55). "Playing softly with a sense of intimacy not often encountered in jazz," writes Schuller, "Byas places each one of his notes as if they were a series of incontrovertible truths" ("Quintessence" 255). Schuller discusses what makes this solo grand in very technical terms, but gets closest to a non-musician's reality by saying the "almost eerie beauty" of the solo is produced by Byas's mixing two different musical worlds: "the classical modes (which go back to Greek antiquity) and the blue notes of jazz" ("Quintessence" 255). During the years with Basie in New York, Byas became part of the underground bebop scene, and participated in the next significant evolution of jazz.

As a result of playing simultaneously in a big band and at the all-night jam sessions at places like Minton's Playhouse and Monroe's Uptown House, Byas is widely recognized for his capacity to span the easier pace of swing styles and the breakneck speed of bop. Feather notes in 1960 that Byas is indebted to Hawkins for his "big sound" but Byas "added modern characteristics, rhythmically and harmonically" (Encyclopedia 150). Owens feels some of Byas's flutter-phrasing, the sound most commonly associated with bop, is a result of listening to Charlie Parker, who was beginning to use scales in a new



way while he was with Jay McShann's orchestra (45). Gitler counters, however, by saying it may have been the other way around; he quotes Charlie Parker describing the scene in 1941, at Clark Monroe's Uptown House, one of the two Harlem clubs generally acknowledged as the birthplaces of bop, ". . . Don Byas was there, playing everything there was to be played" (qtd. in "Minton's" 75). Parker was in New York with the Jay McShann orchestra. In the same chapter, Gitler relates the story of Oklahoma trumpeter Howard McGhee, a player Miles Davis praised as a major influence, who remembered telling trumpeter Roy Eldridge, "You're staying too traditional. You ought to come and hang out with Don Byas and learn to play" (qtd. in "Minton's" 86). Subsequently, Eldridge went from playing in the Louis Armstrong style to delivering "a furious succession of rapid phrases" (qtd. in Minton's" 86).<sup>4</sup>

Instead of being locked into past jazz styles, Byas moved forward stylistically in the 1940s. Indeed, Wilson does call Byas a "post-traditionalist" in Jazz: The Transition Years 1940-1960 (115). Balliet, on the other hand, does not feel Byas's use of the quickly-keyed scales always provided great results: "Byas, an extraordinary technician, has frequently allowed his fluidity to flood his emotions" ("Trial" 125-26). The best early example of this fluttering, rapid fire phrasing mixed with smooth, soulful melodies, is available on record and compact disc as The Harlem Jazz Scene-1941, featuring Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet, Thelonious Monk on piano, Oklahoma-raised Charlie Christian on guitar, and Don Byas on tenor saxophone. Feather wrote the liner notes for the album and says it is a representative session showing the genesis of bop. Feather, however, focuses on the interchange between Christian and Gillespie, whereas, in a chapter about Dizzy Gillespie, Williams says it is in these sessions where Gillespie is learning from Byas. "Compare [Gillespie] with Don Byas here," Williams writes of the Monroe's session, "Byas is already a master player in command of his own probing, Coleman Hawkins-based style. Gillespie is only at the beginning of self-knowledge ("Dizzy" 188). It would be possible to infer from a distance Don Byas was influencing not only one of jazz's and bebop's great

trumpeters in Gillespie, but also bop's most monumental saxophonist, Charlie Parker. Even one of Parker's biographers, Ross Russell, describes Parker's style as "a variation of Don Byas out of Coleman Hawkins" ("At Billy Berg's" 4). Priestley, who also wrote a biography of Parker, further details the influences of Byas on Parker and jazz:

Although derived ultimately from Hawkins, Byas's style was more involved harmonically, a fact attributable to the direct influence of Art Tatum. In this respect, [Byas] could justifiably claim to have had a decisive effect on Parker; and while his on-the-beat accentuation was shunned by Parker, it came back with a vengeance in the work of the Coltrane school. ("Byas" 70)

Between 1941 and 1944, Byas recorded a number of sessions with Basie, some tracks with Billie Holiday, others with Buck Clayton, did several sessions with other small jazz groups yet to be seen or heard as a result of the World War II vinyl ban and musicians union strike, and was part of the Coleman Hawkins Sax Ensemble, which recorded for Keynote (Burns 6).

In 1944, Dizzy Gillespie hired Byas, along with Oklahoma bassist Oscar Pettiford, drummer Max Roach and pianist George Wallington for a job that opened up on 52nd Street in New York City (Charters, "Nobody" 321). The group is known variously as the "first modern jazz group" (Horricks 178), or the "first of the bop bands" (Ulanov, History 267). Arnold Shaw, in 52nd Street: The Street of Jazz, explains that Byas's appearance with the group "helped contribute to a sound that became basic to bop - the trumpet-tenor sax unison duo," and, subsequently, "the quintet became the first bop combo to play The Street" (275). Charters, who wrote his book from all kinds of sources, e.g., interviews, press clippings, trade journals, newspapers, leaflets, posters, and reviews, describes the reaction to the group's sound:

Their music, with its jarring dissonance and abrupt rhythmic irregularity, was soon the talk of the street. The new band, the first bop band to play together for a large audience, was almost immediately controversial and for several months the music

was called "Fifty-Second Street Jazz. ("Nobody" 321)

As jazz's new style developed, Don Byas blew in front of the line, but some critics feel he was not completely a bop musician, that he was still too much of a swing man and all he did was set the stage for Charlie Parker. Gitler reports that even though Byas was active on Fifty-Second Street before Parker and Dexter Gordon, and that he had performed many of the feats necessary for a bop musician, i.e., innovation, speed, improvisation, "his phrasing echoed Coleman Hawkins and was not really in keeping with bop" ("Dexter" 206). In a contradiction, however, while saying Gordon was a more complete saxophonist, Gitler explains that Gordon was not even into the style until he came to New York and heard Hawkins and Byas, and that the low tones of Gordon's ballads remind one of the "ballad master" Don Byas ("Dexter" 206). Even though Byas worked with Gillespie on the first successful bop recordings, Horricks writes, "Byas changed his playing style very little. He never went to a harmonic source for his improvisation and he never modified his tone to the smaller, more pure sound demanded by Lester Young" (178).

What is odd about that criticism is that Byas is routinely praised for his full, "sensuous" sound, and to shrink it would eliminate one of Byas's most common stylistic touchstones, such as in "Harvard Blues" (Berendt 222). On the 1944 recordings with Gillespie, Burns says Byas was the most successful of his contemporaries (Webster, Hawkins) in adapting his style to the moderns. "His work," Burns writes of Byas, "though having some of the rhythmic and melodic characteristics of bop, was still harmonically and emotionally based on the swing era" (5). By remaining with his roots and still adapting to the new style, Byas was able to maintain his individuality and creative progression. Williams praises Byas for the 1944 Gillespie session: "Byas whirls through the chord changes with his imaginative, arpeggio based style. What is not so expected is the ease and the verve with which he plays the unison ensembles in the accents of bop" ("Dizzy" 194). Priestley surmises that "[Byas] was widely regarded as the prime tenor player of the period, superior to the current work of either Coleman Hawkins or Lester Young" ("Byas" 70).

Invariably, Don Byas is considered to be the tenor saxophonist who led jazz into the modern era.

Strong evidence suggesting Byas should certainly be classified as a modern comes from Benny Goodman's biographer and musician James Collier: "To my mind, the only swing musician who managed to cross the line [to bop] was Don Byas" ("Bop" 325). In 101 Best Jazz Albums, Lyons places Byas in his swing chapter and his bebop and modern jazz chapters, calling Byas "important" in the former and "a major jazz talent" in the latter. Savage tells us, "The transition from the swing music of the 1930s to 'bop' of the 1940s was not an easy one for many performers to make, but Byas was a musician who had no trouble" ("All-Stars" 97). Litweiller agrees with the previous statements and calls Byas a member of the first transitional generation of jazz and that he spent most of his career "completely at home with the various aspects of bop" ("Transition" 105).

In 1946, Byas reached his critical apex when he recorded again with Dizzy Gillespie on "Anthropology," "52nd Street Theme," "Ol' Man Bebop," and the now standard jazz classic "Night in Tunisia." The album on which the songs were released also included four songs by a Coleman Hawkins-led group and was an immediate success. According to Charters, "It outsold every other jazz album released during the year" ("Dizzy" 326). In Esquire's 1946 Jazz Book, edited by Paul Miller, Byas was given the Silver Award, behind Coleman Hawkins and ahead of Charlie Parker for tenor saxophonist of the year. Byas is praised for his "explosive fast and soulful slow styles" by Jazz Foundation head Malcolm Braverman (44), and called by Metronome editor Barry Ulanov "an experimenter, and possessor of a loveliness of tone" (76). Byas left Gillespie for a job with Duke Ellington which did not work out (Ulanov, History 270), but the misfire did not discourage Ellington from hiring Byas on a 1950 tour of Europe, or saying in his memoirs Byas "definitely influenced the avant-garde" (Ellington 211). The reason Ellington was able to find Byas in Europe is because Byas went there in 1946 with the Don Redman band and took up residence there, finding European audiences more appreciative of his work than

those back in United States. Although Byas toured and recorded intermittently with various European and American jazz artists throughout Europe until his death, he never regained the status he had held in the United States in the 1940s. Of the several interesting recordings in which Byas exhibits both bop phrasing and huge, warm tone for which he is known, one of particular interest is 1958's Europa Jazz, in which Byas works with Coleman Hawkins and Stan Getz on "Back Home in Indiana." According to the liner notes for the album, "In this piece, Byas' responses to Hawkins inspiration are in the purest of modern terms. It almost seems as if Byas were giving back to Hawkins a style, filtered through his own personal one, that the master had invented a long time before" (Hawkins). Although Byas's fame in Europe throughout the remainder of career was substantial, he returned to the United States only once in 1970 when he appeared at the Newport Jazz Festival. Byas died of lung cancer August 24, 1972 in Amsterdam (Owens 176).

Judging by his recordings, critics feel Don Byas's most prolific and influential period of playing was between 1940 and 1946.<sup>5</sup> In Erlewine's All Music Guide, Byas is given the categories of swing, bop, and blues-jazz. "Byas knows all the tricks of the trade," writes Erlewine, "overblowing effects, a huge tone, [and he was] an incredible blues and ballad player" (79). Ron Wynn, in the All Music Guide to Jazz, says,

Don Byas was an innovative, groundbreaking player whose style was the precursor of bop in its use of substitute chords. He was a great soloist, especially on balads. He was one of the most successful musicians at finding a comfortable way to blend swing and bop influences; the results proved thoroughly personal and distinctive.  
(127)

Finally, by the beginning of the the 21st century, Byas's recording career and critical status is not only intact, but exalted. The Rolling Stone Jazz Record Guide sums up much of what has been written in this essay: "Don Byas' ferocious tenor work is one of the key links between the swing and bop eras. His advanced harmonic knowledge and awesome

command of his instrument make for some of the most stimulating listening of the period" (43).

Although harder to find than Basie's "Harvard Blues," for an example of Byas's abilities and touchstones, listen to his recording of "Stardust" on The Harlem Jazz Scene - 1941, an excerpt of which is included on the compact disc here (Track 5). The piece opens with the big tone of Byas floating over the melody, lifting it with his sensitive understanding of the tune's progressions. The long, slow blue notes are reminiscent of both Claude Williams's opening notes on the blues and the old Muscogee (Creek) hymn, both of which are included on the compact disc here (Tracks 1 and 3). Then, Byas rips through the key's chromatic and harmonic scales, before giving over the spotlight to Dizzy Gillespie for his turn at the melody. In the process, Byas -- along with Gillespie, Theolonius Monk, and Charlie Christian -- established 52nd Street in New York City as the cultural hearth of bebop. Don Byas not only fit in that environment, but bolstered it, as a result of his years of apprenticeship and training in Muskogee and Langston, Oklahoma, his eventual employment by several blues-soaked territory bands, as well as in the Count Basie Orchestra where Byas achieved notoriety for serving up the sweet and melancholy tones for which he is still known today by jazz critics and fans. Byas's significance grows, however, when he is put in the context of the bebop era where he helped lead in the next evolution in jazz. Like his other major home town musicians, Byas was able to vault over stylistic barriers, which, in turn, stands as testimony for the significant multi-cultural and multi-musical environment where he had his primary musical experiences.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Refer to Berendt (222), McRae (104), Litweiler (105), and Savage ("Oklahoma" 97) for references to Don Byas's notability for having been able to bridge the swing and bop era.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Gammond (203), Schuller, Swing (426), and Ulanov, Handbook, (163) for few critics who link Byas to Coleman

<sup>3</sup> See Russell, Jazz, (239). Russell, among many others connects Don Byas to Ben Webster.

<sup>4</sup> Panassie (88) provides a description of Roy Eldridge's trumpet style.

<sup>5</sup> Refer to Horricks (178) and Savage "Oklahoma" (97) for two of many critics who agree the mid-1940s were Byas's most prolific and critically important years.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### JAY McSHANN: MORE THAN JUST THE MAN WHO BROUGHT US CHARLIE PARKER

Called a prophet of the Kansas City diaspora (Giddins, "Egg" 94) and by adventurous band leader Stan Kenton "one of the original exponents of big band jazz" (Lee 331), Jay McShann is perhaps best known by many critics as the bandleader who provided saxophonist Charlie Parker with his first major professional gig and recording opportunities, but McShann has also become recognized as an important transitional pianist whose style rose out of the ragtime and boogie-woogie traditions of the Southwest to foreshadow the oncoming bop era, and as a progressive bandleader whose keen ear for musical talent encouraged the flourishing of not only Parker, but Gene Ramey, Jimmy Witherspoon and Lowell Fulson.<sup>1</sup>

Jay McShann grew up with a foundation of both the staid and exciting African-American religious traditions in Muskogee. In addition, he came from a musical family and sat in on his sister's piano lessons with Aaron Bell's mother before she ran him off for getting "free lessons." His father took him to area gospel singing conventions and he watched the territory bands rehearse in Muskogee. As a teenager, McShann was surrounded by the evolution and business of jazz in his neighborhood and his high school, the segregated Manual Training High School where his band teacher taught him to "compliment the blues." Another local musician, Don Byas who was four years older than McShann, gave him his first professional job as piano player. Finally, of course, McShann had the opportunity to witness the music scene in the many entertainment facilities for African-Americans in Muskogee, and could hear the broadcasts of Earl "Fatha" Hines from Chicago on his radio at night (Appendix D).

Critically, however, McShann's significance, beyond the fact of his taking Charlie Parker to New York City for the first time, evolved slowly through the 20th century into a powerhouse of praise by the end of the century. With regard to encyclopedic



information, neither Chilton, Driggs, nor Feather give much in the way of critical appraisal of McShann's work, other than Driggs saying McShann is noted for his "percussive piano playing" (73). Panassie gives more generous praise saying McShann is "extremely talented, especially when playing the blues in which he often interprets in the boogie-woogie idiom" (174). In the same entry, Panassie also says McShann's band was at its height between 1940 and 1942. Priestly writes, "McShann is noted for his compelling solo playing with an indefinable blend of blues, boogie, Basie and a bit of Earl Hines" (317). Perry takes McShann even further in jazz's evolution, saying his band was a Gillespie predecessor and "took big band jazz from Kansas City idioms to be-bop idioms" (187). Perry goes on to discuss how McShann's band featuring Parker was more adventurous than Count Basie's: "Although be-bop was essentially a small group phenomenon, the ground for the movement was prepared by a fascinating series of short-lived transitional big bands of which McShann's was the first" (150). Perry explains that McShann's band departed from Basie's predictable arrangements, and stumbled "towards be-bop harmony and rhythm" (150).

Boogie-woogie is the necessary starting place for any critical study of Jay McShann's music. Silvester states that McShann, born January 12, 1916 in Muskogee, Oklahoma, must be considered one of the important second generation boogie-woogie pianists, the first generation having grown out of the ragtime tradition and possessing a rougher quality. The new generation possessed "richer tone colouring, more complex harmonies and a precision of form that was not present in work of the older pianists" ("Boogie" 37). These musical touchstones are commonly associated with the development of modern jazz. In this important work for understanding the boogie-woogie idiom, Silvester provides one of the usual biographies that go along with any introduction of McShann to readers and listeners, then explains how McShann went to Kansas City in 1934 and became involved in the same jam session scene discussed in the context of Don Byas in the previous chapter ("Depression" 103). McShann's first job as a musician, incidentally, was

at age fourteen in a band led by Byas out of Muskogee (Driggs 73). For McShann's own account of his youth and early musical experiences in Muskogee, see the two oral histories attached to this manuscript as Appendices D & E.

Jay McShann literally grew up in the Southwestern blues tradition (Russell, "McShann" 187). In Kansas City, McShann engaged in frequent jams with Pete Johnson, who is well known as the pianist on "Roll 'em Pete," with Joe Turner, considered to be the prototype of the rhythm and blues, and rock and roll styles to follow. Silvester says McShann's solos on "Hootie Blues" and "Vine Street Boogie" show McShann's synthesis of the styles of Ammons, Lewis and Johnson, and "on this evidence, he should be placed as an important second-generation boogie-woogie pianist, not quite their equal but close enough to be considered an important and influential pianist" ("Depression" 104). Not everyone agrees on the importance of the style, however, as Just Jazz, published in Britain in 1957, attests.

Disappointed by jazz's evolution, Traill decries the bop and other modern movements of jazz which "have afflicted the jazz scene" and "threaten to dominate its future" (112). Throughout the book, Traill laments the loss of dixieland and swing, saying the boogie-woogie revival of the 1930s and 1940s gave rise to a whole new generation of boogie-woogie players, including McShann, who played "technically adequate boogie but had nothing of importance to say" (26). Feather calls boogie-woogie's influence on jazz one of "relentless intensity and drive," yet feels the style became boring for that same reason once it became commercialized by the 1940s in songs such as the Andrews Sisters' "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." Feather calls McShann a "souvenir" of the style whose solos are "raw, rhythmic meat" (Book of Jazz, 65). Silvester places the form in a more important historical context, however, and should be consulted for boogie-woogie's contributions to jazz before one dismisses the style in total.

McShann's tracks from 1934 to 1937 are hard to follow as he played with a number of bands in and out of Kansas City. In 1937, McShann was in a group led by Buster Smith, of which seventeen-year-old Charlie Parker was a member (McCarthy 48). The

association became inescapable for McShann, as often when his name comes up in jazz history books, it is in reference to Parker. This survey of scholarship, however, operates under another premise surrounding Jay McShann: not enough credit has been given to him for his own abilities, techniques, foresight, and longevity.

No less than four important works on jazz devote chapters to Jay McShann and /or his orchestra.<sup>1</sup> McCarthy's Big Band Jazz does a very good job documenting the personnel who played with McShann up until 1945, but does not offer much in the way of critical appraisal of the band's efforts. Schuller provides the musician's insight into to McShann's playing: "... an outstanding pianist, technically adept beyond the level of most of his contemporaries" ("Territory" 793). With "jumping octaves, dazzling runs, and left-hand punctuations," Schuller writes, "[McShann] managed to incorporate in a very personal way the blues and boogie-woogie tradition" ("Territory" 793). Although some critics say McShann's band was second only to Basie's in its ability to swing and in popularity (Megill 132, Schuller "Territory 795), Pearson reports that when the group was at it its peak, "Contemporaries assert that McShann led the only post-Moten K.C. band that ever challenged Count Basie musically, and that the McShann band at its peak may have surpassed Basie" ("McShann" 164). Determining what Basie himself felt about McShann is difficult since McShann only comes up once in Basie's autobiography, and then only in reference to McShann's former bassist Gene Ramey joining his band in the 1950: "[Ramey was in] that great rhythm section in Jay McShann's wonderful band" ("Comeback" 300). That is as close as we get to a word from Basie about the man many consider to have been yapping at his heels for Kansas City's band supremacy. Charters, in his widely quoted history of the New York scene, says McShann's playing was even closer to the Southwest blues and boogie-woogie styles, which gave it an "earthier" blues feeling than the New Jersey born Basie, and that made the McShann band immensely popular ("Harlem" 302). Nonetheless, as Dance writes,

McShann is a pianist and bandleader who reputation has been overshadowed by the

immense legend surrounding Parker, whom he brought to New York with his band 1942 . . . The importance subsequently attached [Parker's] innovations by critics and musicians helped obscure the fact that McShann was and remains one of the great players in the swing tradition. ("Holy" 248)

McShann went to New York on the success of a national hit, "Confessin' the Blues," featuring Walter Brown on vocals. The song was one of the biggest sellers for an rhythm and blues band of the period, even though it was not in the style the band preferred to play (Pearson, "McShann" 163). The group's repertoire was largely made up of "riff tunes" on which the band could jam, but when the opportunity arose to record for Decca Records in 1941, the company's producer who had overseen earlier Count Basie Sessions, wanted a blues tune and so the group did it as an afterthought. Eventually, the record sold more than 500,000 copies and lit up the nation's jukeboxes in 1941 and 1942. Russell notes that "From then on the Jay McShann Orchestra was the band that played the blues" ("Band" 123). Even though Russell misspells McShann's hometown as Muskegon (sic), he calls McShann "versatile" and "powerful," and provided Parker with freedom to blow as creatively as he could ("Woodshedding" 93). On the "B" side of "Confessin' the Blues" is a McShann/Parker composition called "Hootie Blues," Hootie being McShann's nickname because of his taste for liquor at the time. McShann explains,

when I first came to Kansas City, the weather was kind of warm and so I went around to different clubs all the time. Guys would say, "Hey, are you going to play with us tonight." I'd say, "Yeah, I'll sit in and jam." So, the guys would wink at the bartender and say, "Hey bartender, fix this old boy up here. He just got in here from down in Oklahoma somewhere. Fix him up one of them specials." Well, you remember back when they used to have 3.2 beer? Well, the bartender would just put a thimble of alcohol in the glass and then pour that cold beer on top of it, and that alcohol made it taste sweet and made it taste good. I didn't drink beer because I didn't like it. But that alcohol made the beer taste good and so I said, "Man, this is

some good beer. Where did it come from? Give me another one bartender." So, they asked if I wanted another one, and I said yes, so they fixed me another one, and then they asked me to play and I couldn't get out my chair. So, they started calling me Hootie. They'd talk about me to other musicians and say, "Yeah, Hootie was down there the other night." They'd say, "Hootie?" [They'd] say, "Yeah, you know that guy that came down to the club the other night and got hootied. That bartender fixed him a couple, three of those drinks and he couldn't get up out of his chair to play the piano." So, they started calling me Hootie and it stuck right until today. (Appendix E)

Although not given much attention by jukebox players, "Hootie Blues" "sent a shock wave through the musicians who stumbled across it," mainly because Parker's solo in the introduction is considered "one of the important jazz records of the decade" (Russell, "Band" 123). The reason why, however, is because of Parker and not because of McShann, although McShann's role should not be underplayed as another Parker biographer reminds us: "It is to [McShann's] great credit, although Bird's style was quite different than that of the rest of his men in the band, he realized Parker had something" (Reisner 146). Wilson believes the McShann band offered Parker the right place to develop his ideas within the framework of a disciplined organization ("Revolution" 16). Schuller explains Parker is not the only unique sound happening within the band on songs from that session, which was the last session on which Parker would play with McShann. Schuller writes, "McShann's own playing can be well assessed on several sides, including "Swingmatism" and "Sepian Bound" ("Territory" 795) The performances keep up the "bite" and "drive" of another highly regarded pianist of the time, Earl Hines, while adding a "rhythmic/harmonic invention" and bringing it together in a "distinctive, playful, bluesish manner" ("Territory" 795). The Earl Hines connection is most appropriate because in Jay McShann's oral history segment of this study he talks about staying up late at night in

Muskogee when his parents thought he was doing school work, but instead he was listening to the broadcasts of Earl Hines out of Chicago. McShann remembers,

Earl Hines used to broadcast from the Grand Terrace in Chicago. What I would do is that I would find out when he was going to broadcast and then I'd tell my folks that I was going to stay up late and get my lessons done. Everybody else would go to be and they'd say, "Boy, that boy sure is studying." And I'd keep the lights burning and I'd look at the watch and it'd be about eleven o'clock, or 11:05, and Earl Hines would come on and I would turn the radio on and this guy would be hollerin', "Father Hines, Father Hines, Father Hines! Coming to you from the Grand Terrace at 39th and State," or whatever street that was. And he'd be hitting the piano keys (sings and imitates Hines' playing). I thought that was one of the greatest things I had ever heard. It was so descriptive. It made it exciting the way they announced it. So, the folks thought I was studying, but I was staying up so I could hear him (laughs). (Appendix D)

At least two critics say it was because of McShann's basic blues format Parker stayed behind in New York when the group planned on returning to Kansas City in 1942. Keepnews says as much when he says Parker "left the limited confines of McShann's rather routine Kansas City riff-and-blues outfit" (210). Collier would have us believe "Parker was now fed up with the routine swing of the McShann band, and no doubt with band discipline, too" ("Parker" 367). Gitler is not so quick to dismiss McShann's blues as an influence on Parker: "The time [Parker] spent with McShann gave his talent the nourishment necessary for him to develop as a fully mature artist in the mid-forties" ("Parker" 20). Gitler goes on to say Parker's adherence to the blues tradition is evident on many of his later recordings and it was his involvement with McShann that strongly influenced this allegiance to the blues: "[McShann's] basically blues-oriented framework was obviously conducive to [Parker's] early experiments" ("Parker" 21). So, it was exactly what McShann was criticized for by Collier and Keepnews that allowed Parker to

explore his new directions. Harrison reinforces this point saying, "The early days in Kansas City and membership in bands like Jay McShann's determined that Parker was fundamentally a blues musician. Blues remained the basis of everything he played . . ." ("Parker" 279). Much of this quibbling seems trite when Keil's Urban Blues is taken into account. He notes Kansas City was wide open town in the 1930s and felt little of the depression's influence because of the city's base as drinking and gambling mecca for the region. This made the town a meeting place for all kinds of musicians who played the casino and clubs ("Blues" 62). Newton explains why the Kansas City "riff" style, of which McShann was obviously a proponent, is so important to the development of jazz. It was more flexible than the pop formulas of Duke Ellington, it allowed the big bands to absorb the most vigorous elements of African-American folk music such as blues singing and blues piano, and, finally, the Kansas City style:

[McShann] allowed and even encouraged the utmost technical inventiveness and adventurousness among the players. For this reason, Kansas City, more than any other city, became the incubator of the musical revolution in jazz, while at the same time its most radical innovators, like Parker, remained rooted in the blues. ("Blues" 111)

Without delving too far into the life of Parker, at least one of his biographers, Brian Priestley, and one very well known critic, Dave Dexter, report Parker's heroin addiction had worsened when he left McShann. So much so, Priestley says, Parker fell asleep on the bandstand and on a trip to Detroit with his next group, Parker overdosed and had to be left behind (22). Dexter reports more details of Parker's slip into heroin-addled oblivion, even though his most illustrious recordings were yet to be made. McShann headed back to Kansas City ("Bird" 148).

1943 was the final year for the Jay McShann Orchestra as a large unit. While Kansas City bands were able to play through the depression, they could survive through World War II. The final blow came when McShann was accosted by federal agents as he came

off the bandstand in New York and given his induction papers (Pearson, "McShann" 164). Most critics define the demise of the McShann Orchestra as the end of the Kansas City era since so many of the New York bands were downsizing and replacing members with New York musicians. As Schuller sums up, "For a brief moment of history McShann and his orchestra, with the fortuitous momentary presence of Charlie Parker, represented an eloquent form of blues-oriented jazz, a fitting flourishing of the territory band tradition" ("Territory" 796).

On returning from the service, McShann led a number of small groups and recorded quite frequently throughout the rest of the 1940s and 1950s with small combos, and with the blues-jazz singer Jimmy Witherspoon, considered a leading jazz singer in league with Jimmy Rushing and Joe Turner (Driggs 73). Townley feels Witherspoon made his finest recordings with McShann in 1957 (6). Also during the 1950s, McShann began working with fellow Muskogeeite Claude "Fiddler" Williams, a relationship which continues to the present day. McShann continued recording in the 1960s for Capitol Records and began touring the United States and Europe, often with only a bassist and a drummer. Discussing the 1966 Capitol LP McShann's Piano, jazz critic Stanley Dance explains it "had wide circulation and served to introduce McShann as the singer he necessarily became in order to answer request for the unforgotten hits with Walter Brown" ("Jay" 54). Dance notes that although Brown was on the recordings with McShann that became hits, "[McShann] has a similar regional accent and vocal quality, but he sings much better than Brown, with more attention to melodic variety and more warmth and humor" ("Jay" 54). In 1972, McShann's album The Man from Muskogee, not only boosted McShann's already noteworthy career, but also resurrected the career of Claude Williams by featuring him on the album.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and now into 2000, Jay McShann has toured extensively in Europe, appearing at music festivals world-wide. He is the subject of the 1978 documentary film, Hootie Blues, and is also showcased in the TV documentary Last



of the Blue Devils, even though he was never in the important territory group from Oklahoma after which the program is named. He has recorded for the Capitol, Atlantic, Master Jazz, and Sackville labels in the United States, and the Black and Blue label in Europe. Of course, McShann has received many accolades, to include induction into the Kansas City Hall of Fame, the Jazz Oral History Award from the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies, the Jazz Master Award from the Afro-American Museum in Philadelphia, the National R & B Foundation Pioneer Award in Los Angeles, the Kansas City Jazz Heritage Award, and the Jazz Era Pioneer Award from the National Association of Jazz Educators. His home state has honored him with induction into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame, and the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame, the latter having named the Jay McShann Lifetime Achievement Award for him.

In 1998, Stanley Dance writes that McShann's position on the ladder of current jazz greats is unshakeable. Dance says, "Today, he is generally recognized as the top blues pianist in the business, but there is unjust limitation to that description. He plays and sings an extensive range of material besides blues . . . with skill and insouciant charm that triumph" ("Jay" 54). McShann remains active and capable, having released Hootie's Jumpin' Blues in 1997, and touring extensively through the time of this writing. As a result of his touring and recording in Europe, Giddins writes,

[In Europe], he is widely recognized as an incisive pianist with a repertoire that encompasses Fats Waller and Thelonious Monk as well as the barrelhouse tradition. He can be exhilarating at impromptu sessions, adding tremendous vitality to rhythm sections and inspiring soloists. ("Moment's" 92)

Finally, Jay McShann must be considered an important jazz musician and bandleader who not only fostered the flourishing of Charlie Parker, but is representative of several American musical piano styles, and set musical depth charges that would go off under jazz and propel it into the modern era. Maybe Brisbin puts it best when he says, "No name is more prominently displayed on the signpost at the intersection of jazz and blues than

pianist and bandleader Jay McShann" ("McShann" 31). Priestly explains, "McShann is noted for his compelling solo playing, an indefinable blend of blues, boogie, Basie, and bit of Early Hines" ("McShann 317). The difficulty one has in classifying McShann's success further illustrates the need for understanding the cultural milieu in which he developed. When the opportunity arises to find out more about Muskogee, however, interviewers tend to skim over its importance, such as in the Jan. 2000 issue of Living Blues, in which a feature on Kansas City jazz places McShann on the cover and interviews him and Claude Williams in the issue. Although illuminating about McShann and Williams, the issue does not give much attention to the environment in which the two musicians and their peers developed. McShann talks as much about Muskogee as he has anywhere in the Jan. 2000 issue of Living Blues, with two whole pages dedicated to his youth in the city. However, only a little new material comes to light in the Living Blues oral history that is not included in the two interviews that are part of this dissertation. With regards to Muskogee, McShann's does help with the explanation of why its jazz scene was so fruitful: "In Muskogee, for the black people, we had two [dance halls] on Second Street and two on Main. We had the Wintergarten and a lot of other dance halls" (Brisbin 18). That environment allowed McShann to absorb the blues-based territory bands with hot blowing swinging horn sections and lead instrumentalists, a model he used with his own group on songs such as his compositions with Charlie Parker like "Hootie Blues" and "Wichita Blues," and his solo efforts "Jump the Blues," and "St. Louis Mood." As if that were not training enough, Jay McShann learned to "compliment the blues" in his high school band, a technique he never forgot as evidenced on any number of recordings where McShann's tinkling accents are the subtle spice which elevate the recording to grandeur. When McShann's piano takes off at the head of the arrangement or in a solo, blues drip from every finger, yet the lively counterpoint of ragtime and boogie woogie also permeates his improvisations on the blues. More significantly, however, listen to Jay McShann's solos on his own composition, "Vine Street Boogie." In the 1944 recording of this piece issued

as Charlie Parker with Jay McShann and his Orchestra: Early Bird, McShann starts with the traditional approach to boogie woogie, but by the middle of the tune McShann begins to thrust off beat chromatic chords into the bridge, a not so subtle reminder that McShann was keenly aware of, and able to comment on, the bebop revolution in jazz. As with the other musicians from Muskogee, Jay McShann has been able to negotiate the twists and turns of jazz's historical progressions to not only survive the turn of the 21st century as a highly regarded contemporary practitioner of jazz, but also as one of the musicians who helped guide the form through its formative and reformatory periods. McShann explains how he came to represent more than one jazz form:

I wanted to play able to play boogie-woogie in case somebody asked me to play it. So I needed to get in shape for it. I'd get off early down there at Monroe's [in Kansas City] and go listen to the boogie-woogie players, then go by and listen to the jazz players, and then go by and catch the blues players. Consequently, I wound up with jazz and blues" (Appendix E).

As the historical chapters of this study have shown, the reason why jazz musicians came from Muskogee was that there was a substantial African-American community to support the scene, and subsequently, the musicians. In addition, Manual Training High School provided training, as did the opportunity to get on the job training with a touring group or band. As noted earlier, McShann himself went on some of his first professional jobs and learned to compliment the blues with his band director at Manual Training High School, and his career's success as a hard-to-define blend of jazz and blues further illustrates the significance of the city in which he grew up, where these same elements combine in the earliest days of jazz.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For solid summaries of McShann's recording dates and career, see Giddins 92, Shaw 111 & 211, and Silvester 104.

<sup>2</sup> At least four works providing separate chapters on Jay McShann and /or his orchestra include Dance's World of Count Basie, Pearson's Goin', and two books by Russell: Bird Live and Jazz Style in Kansas City.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### AARON BELL: ROCK SOLID BASSIST FOR THE STARS

Although critical commentary is slight on bassist Samuel Aaron Bell, born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, April 24, 1922, the titans of jazz with whom he performed and recorded are testament to his standing in 20th century jazz.

Often called an "Ellingtonian" because he played from 1960-62 with Duke Ellington, Aaron Bell grew up surrounded by music in Muskogee. Stanley Dance describes Bell's musical upbringing in one of the longer essays giving full attention to him as a jazz musician. Dance explains Bell's mother was a music teacher, he took lessons from her, and in high school he became interested in the band: "As he sought to express himself musically, his mother's knowledge was of great assistance. She played piano and organ, and gave vocal tuition. One of her pupils was the well-known pianist and bandleader, Jay McShann"<sup>1</sup> (202). Bell also tells about his family's musical environment in the oral history included here:

First, in the family I studied piano with my mother. All of us, there were nine in my family -- seven boys and two girls, at some time or the other studied the piano, but everybody didn't stick with it. I had a sister who was really a great pianist. Both of them could play well, but my oldest sister, Launelia had the best reputation. She played classical music. Later, I tried to get her interested in jazz. We used to play duets together, you know, classical piano duets, and then when I took up the bass we used to play together. I didn't take up the bass until my last year of high school. Before that I was playing tuba and trumpet, and the piano. I started experimenting with writing at an early age, when I was about 13. (Appedix F)

As for how he became exposed to jazz, Bell explains to Dance that he became interested in jazz in Muskogee by listening to records, as well as T. Holder's group, with whom the young Barney Kessel would jam, but Bell's tuba did not necessarily fit into the

mix. As McShann also notes in his oral history, by the 1930s the tuba had been replaced in the jazz band by the stand up bass. Bell's story to Dance paints the jazz picture in Muskogee as one big neighborhood: "Don Byas lived about a couple of houses from me, and when he and Oliver [Green] got together for a little session, I'd go over and listen" (209). Byas was more than a musical inspiration for Bell, however, as the older Byas ensured Bell would have a career. Bell remembers, "He saved my life once, when he pulled me out of an old gravel pit where we used to swim" (World 202). Bell remembers this event in the oral history, also included here as Appendix F.

One of the unique aspects of Aaron Bell's career is that he reversed the trend of musicians leaving the Southwest for the coasts and Kansas City or Chicago when he left Muskogee for New Orleans, the city his mother was from, and began attending Xavier University in 1939. At Xavier he took liberal arts course work with a music major, and learned "an awful lot about jazz" from a young music instructor, Allegretto Alexander. Also in New Orleans, Bell had the opportunity to play with professional dance bands and enjoyed the musical environment where he remembers, "There was always a lot of work-and a lot of musicians" (qtd. in Dance, World 203).

According to Dance, after leaving Xavier in June, 1943, Bell set sail with the United States Navy, and was promptly assigned shore duty in a band at the naval base at Peru, Indiana. After the Navy, Bell picked up with Andy Kirk's band in Tulsa and played bass for Kirk for a year before returning to Muskogee where he took over Manual Training High School's band, taught at his mother's music studio, and became music director of a local radio station. After that year, he finally did make the trip East that so many musicians before him had made, but instead of joining any group, he enrolled in New York University to obtain a master's degree in music, which he did in 1955 (World 204-05). While working on the degree, throughout the 1950s he led his own trio and began to pick up both live performance and recording jobs with people like Cab Calloway, Lucky Millinder, Teddy Wilson, Jimmy Rushing, Stan Kenton, Lester Young in his later years,

and Billie Holiday on her final recording session. However, Aaron Bell will most likely always be remembered for his time with Duke Ellington, "the most significant jazz composer of the genre" (Hodeir Grove 330).

Jazz critic Ron Wynn describes Bell's playing with Ellington from 1960-62: "He was one of the best bassists ever in the Duke Ellington band. His powerful lines and graceful, yet sturdy support provided a rich presence in the rhythm section" (78). Gary Giddins calls Bell's playing "steadfast," but little else can be determined from the critics about Bell's ability. In Bell's own words about his playing with Ellington, he tells Dance, ". . . with Duke I try and anchor it, and to give him something to lean on. And that's a good function for bass, because, after all, when you say 'bass' you mean 'basic'" (World 208). Apparently, Bell preferred a more basic lifestyle than Ellington's whirlwind tour schedule afforded, and in order to realize other ambitions, as well as spend time with his family, "he reluctantly left Ellington in the fall of 1962" (Dance World 210). Since that time, Bell has worked as teacher, played in several Broadway shows, been a resident composer at an experimental New Jersey theater, and been inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame. Presently, Bell is retired from teaching and lives in Mount Vernon, New York. He is hardly dormant, however, as he has new recordings on which he plays piano, having laid off the bass after a surgery. Bell explains how the turn of the 21st century is keeping him busy in the oral history included here:

I played piano with Clark Terry. I made several dates with Clark. I went over and did some European jazz concerts in the summer most recently. I traveled with Louie Bellson the drummer, he was with Duke too, and we traveled all over Europe and South America. I also did a lot of things with Wynton (Marsalis) at the Lincoln Center in New York. I gave a lecture before the concert and I've been doing several of those. I was at the University of Kentucky and did a lecture/demo. I've done two in New York just last week and the week before. I got one coming up in Norwalk, Connecticut with Norwalk Symphony. Duke's band is under the

leadership Paul Ellington now, his son. They are going to be playing and I'll be talking before the concert, but I don't know if I'll play or not. I'm an elder citizen now, so I don't do so much playing, but whenever they want me I'll play. I get a lot of calls for bass and I tell them, "I'm not doing it right now." Maybe later I'll get back to it. (Appendix F)

Not a lot of critical appraisal exists in reference to Bell, save Stanley Dance's inclusion of Bell in a random survey through which we find out Bell's favorite classical composer is Wagner, his favorite songwriter is Duke Ellington, the greatest blues singer he ever heard was Joe Turner, and his favorite recording on which he plays is Ellington's "Suite Thursday" (World of Swing 400-403). Bell appears to be forever linked with Ellington and the other stars for whom he laid down the bassline, however, perhaps of equal importance is his personal history, which reflects the saturation of music around Muskogee while he was growing up, the facilitation of it by the Manual Training High School, and the opportunity to witness jam sessions in Muskogee by other musicians who would go on to make a name for themselves, as Bell himself also did.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For Jay McShann's own version of him "taking lessons" from Aaron Bell's mother, consult McShann's oral history in Appendices D and E.

## CHAPTER NINE

### BARNEY KESSEL: COOL TRANSITIONS AND SUPREME IMPROVISATIONS

In the 1950s blues man B.B. King was the featured guitarist with Tiny Bradshaw's band. The group bade their way out to California, everyone in the band telling B.B. he was doing fine and to keep it up. King tells Charles Keil in a 1960s interview, he believed his bandmates until he found himself at an after hours session on the West Coast and listening to Barney Kessel. King remembers, "I heard Barney Kessel, and he shamed me. It made me want to study hard to better myself as a person and a musician" ("King" 109). Not only blues and jazz guitarists respected Kessel, but those players in the western swing world were also very aware of Kessel. Don Tolle, recording guitarist for western swing band leader Johnnie Lee Wills in the early 50s, explains what it was like to be playing in a club when Kessel walked in:

He would come around when we were playing as the Texas Playboys. Hell, he didn't know who we was. He was so damn far above the rest of us we just knew who he was. I always felt humbled when he walked in. When somebody like that would walk in, it would spook the shit out of anybody. (Interview)

Barney Kessel, "who has contributed handomely to jazz-guitar evolution for four decades" (Britt 91), was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma on October 17, 1923. Like Don Byas, Jay McShann, and Claude "Fiddler" Williams, Kessel is known for his stylistic versatility in being able to cross the borders of several blues and jazz based genres. And, although he is the only non-African-American in the Muskogee group, his Eastern European Jewish father owned a shoe store at 110 S. 2nd across the street from a theater in the heart of the African-American commercial district, and the family lived a block further south on the same street.

Jewish businessmen ran profitable enterprises in the all-Black districts of the late-19th and early-20th century American Southwest. In Dallas's Deep Ellum, Jewish clothiers allowed their African-American customers to try on suits, a practice unheard of in the

South (Govenar and Brakefield 48). In their excellent African-American musicological study, Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged, Govenar and Brakefield report some older citizens of Deep Ellum felt "there was a special relationship between blacks and Jews because of a shared heritage of suffering and discrimination" (49). Kessel remembers his father going to Dallas to do business, which would have been convenient via the M, K, & T or Midland Valley railroads. The elder Kessel was successful enough to have additional shops in nearby Haskell and Checotah, as well as two businesses on South Second, where Kessel grew up.

As a result of growing up in the mostly African-American business and entertainment district, Barney Kessel was equally exposed to the deep jazz tradition in Muskogee, if not even more so than the other musicians in this study. Not only was his father's shop on South 2nd Street, a few doors down at 128 S. 2nd was the family residence which doubled as a clothiers. That address was right next to the Grand Convention Hall, where many of the era's top African-American groups and artists performed. Kessel literally grew up in the shadow of, and eventually took the spotlight in, Muskogee's and Oklahoma's jazz scene in the 1930s. He also grew up working in Muskogee's several movie theaters in the middle 1930s, where he was so exposed to the era's standard American popular music that it became an unconscious part of his repertoire. Of course, those popular songs became much of the foundation for the swing and big band era, and those standards surfaced throughout Kessel's career. In addition, one of the hallmarks of jazz is to be able to play the melody of a song, and then take off on it, using all the powers of improvisation to create something new and original musically, before returning to the melody to close out the song. Usually that melody is a common one that all the musicians know, a standard, on which they can let their individual talents color their improvisational performances. Barney Kessel's involvement in Muskogee's jazz scene further emphasizes the importance of the city's music scene, because if Barney Kessel could grow up and absorb the music he did in Muskogee, and then become an original, innovative, and highly regarded jazz

guitarist, we must say that Muskogee was genuinely part of the cultural hearth of jazz, wherein the traditions of the form were relayed from one generation to the next. Aaron Bells says as much when he remembers,

[Barney] was a good player. His folks had a second hand clothing store down on South Second. Barney used to come up and jam with us a lot at the Deluxe Ballroom and the Grand Ballroom. He worked with Funk Wiley and them sometimes. I wasn't good enough to play with them then, but I used to go up and watch. (Appendix F)

Although McRae and Chilton exclude Kessel from their encyclopedias of jazz (Chilton also leaves out Charlie Parker), Feather includes Kessel in all three of his encyclopedias, further showing the guitarist's involvement in the progression of jazz from the 1940s to the 1970s, and quotes German jazz critic Joachim Ernst Berendt who calls Kessel one of "the most rhythmically vital guitarists in jazz" (Encyclopedia 299). Kernfeld provides practically no criticism, but is useful for filling in some of the historic holes in Kessel's career left out by Feather (650). Priestley writes, "Kessel's best work displays a lithe, boppish style with distinct blues overtones," which continues to suggest in Kessel a theme developed by critics of Byas and McShann, the two other Muskogee musicians who tend to be viewed and heard as musicians made up of a blend of styles. While Panassie says Kessel is "a capable but uneven performer" (Jazz Companion, 158), Ulanov praises him: "[Kessel is] a brilliant single-string performer who, in tone and beat, reminds one all at once of a classical lutanist and Charlie Christian" (Handbook 189).

Kessel's earliest memory of music in Muskogee is hearing hobos sing Jimmie Rogers songs on trains a block away from his house. He took guitar lessons he "never had to unlearn" from a Hawaiian teacher working for the WPA (Appendix G). As a result of his tireless practice habits, and learning songs by working in the movie theaters and listening to friends' records, by 14-years-old Kessel was the only white member of an otherwise all-African-American Muskogee band led by Ellis Ezell (Savage, "Wired" 52), but he also

played with white bands in Muskogee (Appendix G). The members of Ezell's band wanted Kessel to play like a horn in the manner of Christian who grew up playing in Oklahoma City and, at the time, was the featured guitarist in the Benny Goodman band. Christian is considered by almost every critic as the primary exponent of the jazz guitar style after Django Reinhardt. At 16, Kessel met Christian in Oklahoma city, jammed with him on three separate occasions and Kessel's style was set, luckily so too, as Christian would be dead of tuberculosis in a few years at age 23. Collier says the pipeline of jazz guitar runs from Reinhardt and Christian to the guitarists of the bop movement, of which Barney Kessel is listed second behind Remo Palmieri ("Atlantic" 325). Avakian lists Kessel first in following the footsteps of Christian ("Christian" 184). Feather says, "The true Charlie Christian spirit has been captured very closely by Barney Kessel" ("Guitar" 115), and long time Down Beat editor Dave Dexter lists Kessel second to Wes Montgomery in carrying on the Christian traditions ("Revolution" 140). Mongan quotes guitarist Jimmy Gourley, who says, "I find that [Kessel] had even greater ease than Wes Montgomery. Wes had a lot but Barney has even more" (qtd. in Mongan, "To Bop" 119). In an interview with Ralph Gleason, Wes Montgomery himself talks about Kessel first when asked by Gleason to name some of his favorite guitarists. Montgomery says of Kessel, "He's trying to do a lot of things, not just standing still at one particular level. He's trying to get away from the guitar phrase, to get into the horn phrase" (qtd. in Gleason 76). Of course, Kessel had been working on his horn phrasing since he was 13 in Ellis Ezell's band.

Kessel won numerous awards for his work with Lionel Hampton, Ben Webster, Roy Eldridge, Woody Herman, Lester Young and Billie Holliday, garnering him the Esquire Silver Award (1947), Best Guitarist in Down Beat's Readers' Poll (1956-59), in the Jazz Critics' Poll (1953-59), the Metronome Readers' Poll (1958-60), and the Playboy Readers' Poll (1957-60) (Britt 90). Of the Billie Holliday sessions, Davis writes, "The guitarist Barney Kessel provides shimmering pickups, intros, and solos that disguise their harmonic

urbanity in engaging country twang" (139). Kessel did not limit himself to the jazz idiom, however, as he became one of Hollywood's top session guitarists. His credits are as varied as they are eclectic in the 1950s and 1960s. Kessel recorded soundtracks for four Elvis Presley films and was the instrumentalist on the Righteous Brothers' 1965 hit "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," and on the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations" in 1966. He also recorded with Judy Garland, Barbara Streisand, Marlene Dietrich, Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, Ike and Tina Turner, Charlie Parker, Fred Astaire, Stan Kenton, Dinah Shore and Dinah Washington (Savage, "Wired" 54). Kessel's session work could also be heard on television shows such as "Man from UNCLE," "the Odd Couple," "Love American Style" and "I Spy." In all, he worked for almost forty years in Hollywood as an arranger and freelance musician for radio, hundreds of films and TV music for many commercials including Der Wiener Schnitzel and Rice Krispies. Goodwin calls Kessel "the best known guitarist on the coast" ("California" 154).

It is for his jazz playing he became known, however, starting with the Chico Marx big band in 1942-43 upon his move to California from Oklahoma. Kessel played with Artie Shaw in 1945-46. McCarthy calls the group led by Shaw "the most modern and thoroughly jazz-oriented group Shaw ever fronted" ("Swing" 264). Kessel performed with Charlie Barnet in 1945-46-47, and with Benny Goodman in 1947 and 1958.

Kessel's tracks with Charlie Parker are considered jazz classics. Parker and Kessel jammed that year, and afterwards Parker called Kessel for the now legendary Dial Records session. As Gioia notes, Kessel did not immediately pick up on the new bop style, but became interested once he understood it, he wanted to play it. Kessel remembers, "From the minute I began to understand what [Dizzy Gillespie] was doing, I did not like *my* playing because I wanted to articulate that way and didn't know how" (qtd. in West, 277) Russell is lukewarm in his review of Kessel's work on the 1947 Parker session: "Kessel made interesting if insufficiently bold innovations on 'Relaxin' at Camarillo, where he drops the conventional four-four rhythm and plays feed chords. His experiments . . . may lead to

the rehabilitation of this patrician jazz instrument" ("Bebop" 194). Mongan is more enthusiastic: "On 'Cheers, Cheers,' 'Barbados,' and 'Relaxin' at Camarillo,' Kessel redefined the guitar's new rhythmic and harmonic role in bop, with his chordal interpolations and fluent, swinggin solos" ("To Bop" 115). Mongan goes on to say at this point Kessel left the Christianesque realm he found so comfortable and began moving under the influence of Parker's innovations. "In contrast to Christians's linear emphasis, Kessel did not neglect the polyphonic possibilities of his instrument," explains Mongan ("To Bop" 115). Again, Kessel's ability to transcend jazz genres is evidenced by his interest and willingness to grow musically and intellectually during the sessions with Parker.

Barney Kessel purchased two of the guitars in 1948 that he played throughout his career. One was a Gibson L-5 made in 1933. The other was a Gibson L-5 made in 1937. Kessel wrote this author in 1999 as a result of my membership on the Board of Directors of the Friends of Oklahoma Music, an organization which founded and will operate the future Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame. The letter explains he is willing to auction off the guitars to benefit the hall of fame that is planned for construction in Muskogee. The letter itself is a very telling document, quoted here for its historic significance by chronicling some of the highlight's of Kessel's wide-ranging life in music:

... I purchased both [of these guitars] on July 10, 1948. I bought these two guitars from the American guitarist George M. Smith who had owned them since they were made. As a staff musician at the time, he played with 20th Century Fox movie studio in Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s.

After purchasing the two guitars in 1948, I played them from July 1948 - March 1969 for all my work. This included movies for all the major Hollywood studios, four Elvis Presley movies, Barbara Streisand's "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever," two movies with Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, and another with Jerry Lewis alone. I played them on numerous recordings including those with the Righteous Brothers, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sonny & Cher,

the Beach Boys, and records produced by Phil Spector.

I also played them for numerous television shows, including "Hollywood Palace," "The Judy Garland Show," a Bing Crosby Christmas Special with Paul Weston's orchestra, and the Bob Crosby Show. I played them for many radio shows including Bob Crosby's show. I played them for many radio shows including Bob Crosby's, five days a week for a year, and Jack Smith's radio show, five days a week for two years. . . . they are in very good condition. (Kessel letter to the author Jul. 1999).

In 1952, Kessel joined the Oscar Peterson trio. Peterson was one of the most recorded pianists of the 1950s, and it was with him that Kessel helped usher in both the uptempo "hard bop" movement and the laid back West Coast "cool jazz." These recordings continued to raise Kessel's status for jazz critics; however, it was with Ray Brown and Shelley Manne that Kessel would record the 1957 Poll Winners albums, considered by many to be Kessel's finest and most representative performances. Britt says this music is "delightful, timeless [and ] unpretentious" (91).

Although Mongan, a jazz guitarist himself, might be a bit of a cheerleader for Kessel, he does point out Kessel did what we have seen is also notable about Don Byas and Jay McShann. Because he grew up in the tradition of blues and swing, Kessel was able to move into the new regions of jazz being explored by younger players. Although Kessel is at least ten years younger than McShann and Byas, he had both formal music education and exposure to the jazz scene along South Second Street in Muskogee. Kessel tells the story of his own youth in more detail in the oral history section of this study (Appendix G).

As for the staying power of Kessel's music, Mongan describes the way in which Kessel was able to "cross over" between styles: "Bridging the stylistic gap between the bop influenced swingers and those who adopted a cooler, more cerebral approach, Kessel is the outstanding figure of the post-Christian era of guitarists" ("To Bop" 118). Mongan is



not without his faults. In describing Muskogee, he says, "It's a town of cowboys and Indians, only 3,200 (sic) inhabitants, but lots of jazz fans ("To Bop" 114). He does note Jay McShann and Don Byas were from Muskogee, but he erroneously lists clarinetist Pee Wee Russell as being from Muskogee. Russell did have some musical experiences in the town, but we know Russell was born in Missouri (Feather, Encyclopedia 406).

Nonetheless, Mongan does not ask us to take his word for everything, as he turns over the critical rein to Duke Ellington biographer Ralph Gleason who rhapsodizes, "[Kessel] swings so much he breaks down all barriers, psychological and musicological that have been built over the years. he appeals to jazz fans, no matter what their background" (qtd. in Mongan, "To Bop" 118). Gleason goes on to compare Kessel to Count Basie, Ellington, and Benny Goodman, all of whom one can come back to after years and still find "the freshness and vitality that characterizes any art" (qtd. in Mongan, "To Bop" 118). Kessel, like the other Muskogee musicians, was able to transcend the categories into which critics tend to put musicians, and turn up the heat on the notion that Muskogee was one of many cultural hearths of jazz in the United States.

After 1992, Barney Kessel has not been able to play publicly because he suffered a massive stroke in that year. Through the 1990s he was feted around the world with honorary concerts and awards. In 1997, Just Jazz Guitar dedicated an entire collectors issue to honor Kessel's work. The magazine, now out of print, features rare photos provided by Barney and Phyllis Kessel, as well as sources from around the world, interviews, and scores of his personal compositions. On October 14, 1999, he was inducted into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame in a ceremony in Muskogee. As presenter, this author made the following comments before inducting Kessel into the Hall of Fame:

When we look back at the twentieth century and the musicians who pioneered jazz as an art form, we will see Barney Kessel as third in the holy trinity of jazz guitarists, made up of Django Rheinhardt, Charlie Christian, and Barney. Barney

Kessel's playing is intellectual and effortless. Heaven's light shines through his music, challenging for a musician, a joy for the jazz fan, and a simple pleasure for the casual listener. However, as Barney says, neither these, nor any other words, can adequately describe the feeling of any music, which is what makes music the international language, where the stories of our experiences are approximated by the musician, who channels inspiration into a story of melody, harmony, rhythm, tone, and texture.

If jazz is a story, and improvisation is the narrative of jazz, then Barney Kessel is a master storyteller whose recorded music will enlighten and entertain generations to come, with his fifty-seven years of excellence in harmonic elaboration, superior improvisation on the electric guitar, progressive arrangements, and sparkling original compositions. All of which add up to a legendary career and legacy that started about two blocks from where I am standing.

By the end of 1999, in the rush of end of the decade/century/millennium lists, The Daily Oklahoman recognized Barney as one of the top ten musicians from the state in the 20th century behind Woody Guthrie, Charlie Christian, The Blue Devils, Bob Wills, and Roger Miller. The Oklahoman says Kessel "is still considered one of the best improvisational guitarists in the world. Kessel introduced the concept of the guitar in a jazz trio . . . and backed singers from Fred Astaire to the Beach Boys" (Davis 2). In an ironic addition to Kessel's music legacy, the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations," on which Kessel plays, was selected as one of the top ten rock songs ever by a panel of 700 music industry people ('Satisfaction'). Although not able to record new material, Kessel is teaching again, taking on the occasional student, and as a result of tremendous speech progress after his stroke, he is in steady demand as an interviewee about his music and the time in which it surged. According to Kessel, jazz fans have much to look forward to from him as several projects and materials have yet to be released.<sup>2</sup>

Kessel's incredible recording career could hardly be summed up by examining just a few representative performances of either his personal compositions or those of others. One selection stands out as a result of this author's meeting with Kessel on the even of his induction into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame. The piece of music Kessel selected to play for the groups to which he lectured was "You Are the Sunshine of My Life," taken from his 1983 Concord solo release. The song begins with slow, beautiful chords in the song's key, similar to the way Byas and Williams began their blues, then establishes the melody line of the well-known Stevie Wonder song. Before finishing any one particular line of the song, Kessel improvises freely at the end of a phrase, showing his dexterity and intrinsic understanding of harmonic chords. Then, Kessel revs up the tempo a notch while chording through the melody again, accenting the end of each phrase with more improvisational melodic runs. Often, Kessel plays the ascending and descending arpeggios of a chord to contrast harmonically against the key of the song, a phrasing is an important beginning to understanding the melodic philosophy of bebop.<sup>3</sup> Kessel quotes the idiom and then leaps into the bridge providing his own counterpoint and rhythm, all the while adding fast and spontaneous comments on the melody and key. He maintains the rapid fire pace until the tune's crescendo and close, with its descending tones and almost comical one note ending that seems to say either "Gotcha," or "Take that." Either way, in this piece, as in the one included on the compact disc in this dissertation (Track 6), Kessel displays the innate facility for which he is known of taking a theme and turning it out in new and creative ways, which in itself is the narrative of jazz.

Although at the end of his productive recording and performing career as a jazz guitarist, Barney Kessel continues to be a major resource for jazz history, styles, and theory, he will always be considered one of the giants of 20th century jazz, and his hometown of Muskogee, Oklahoma should be recognized as one of many places where the jazz furnace heated up to forge this and other excellent musicians.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Ellis Ezell's oral history in Appendix D for more talk about the band in which Kessel played for Ezell, and Aaron Bell's oral history in Appendix F for his memories of the Ezell band.

<sup>2</sup> The following materials are yet to be released by Kessel:

1. Sixty, one-hour radio shows Kessel made on jazz history
2. Four unreleased live performances, already on compact disc and awaiting release, to include a solo performance in a London, England club in 1982; a club date in Geneva, Switzerland, 1984 with trio (bass and drums); an afternoon concert outside London that he calls *Laugh & Swing*, with trio and solo, 1988; and a concert in Montreal, Canada with himself and bass, 1991.
3. About thirty hours of unreleased live performances of himself all over the world, on cassettes.
4. Three cassettes of an unreleased live performance with the Pete Jolly trio, 1953.
5. Two cassettes of an unreleased live performance of himself with a gypsy violinist in Vienna, Austria.
6. (Marked out by Kessel) One cassette of an evening at Donte's in Los Angeles, California, May, 1972 when he sat in with Joe Pass.
7. Nineteen cassettes of radio interviews with him, done all over the world.
8. Thirteen cassettes of radio interviews with him that are interspersed with music.
9. Ten audio teaching cassettes with written material for guitar. About 80% of this is also applicable for all musicians. (Kessel letter to the author)

<sup>3</sup> One can hear a similar use of arpeggios in the Don Byas track on the compact disc included here (Track 5) or any number of examples from Thelonious Monk.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CLARENCE LOVE, JOE THOMAS, AND WALTER "FOOTS" THOMAS: THE MUSICIANS WHO MOVED AWAY AS CHILDREN

#### **Clarence Love: Bandleader with Attitude**

As the oral history in Chapter 7 attests, Clarence Love, born January 26, 1908 in Muskogee, Oklahoma, exuded energy, confidence, and enterprise. Never really known for his own musicianship, and his bands never recorded, Clarence Love will be remembered as a no-nonsense, professional band leader whose groups inspired others and whose various oral histories and short biographies help flesh out the Southwestern and Kansas City jazz traditions.

Clarence Love is one of the three musicians born in Muskogee who left at a young age, thereby representing some of the larger social issues of the time discussed in Chapter 6. The Love family did move to Kansas City, but not until 1912, well after Oklahoma's faulty segregation and voting laws went into effect. In Love's oral history, he talks about how well off the family was, representing some of the prosperity experienced by early 20th century African-Americans in Muskogee. Leaving must have been difficult, but Love's father went ahead to Kansas City where, as Love says, "He had a better arrangement."

Love's story is significant because of its basic facts: born in Muskogee, moved to Kansas City, received a musical education, began forming bands after high school, kept forming bands with young musicians who would later take off such as Bill "Count" Basie, Billie Holliday, J.J. Johnson, and Eddie Heywood, discovered guitarist Wes Montgomery, and toured with an all-woman orchestra, the Darlings of Rhythm, during the World War II years when most of the male musicians were in uniform.

Since no recordings exist for the Clarence Love's Band (Schuller "Territory" 781), critical information is scant on the groups he did lead. Often, Love is simply listed as one of the many territory bands of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In Jazz in Kansas City and

the Southwest, Ross Russell writes, "Clarence Love, a Kansas City musician operating in and out of Tulsa, led some good bands in the twenties and thirties" (70). Russell also includes Clarence Love's group as one competing in the annual tournament of bands in Kansas City (118), and mentions Ben Webster played with Clarence Love in the late 1920s (238). One of the pianists who worked with Love, Eddie Heywood tells Stanley Dance,

... I went with Clarence Love's band for a couple of years. There was nobody well known in it, but I would say it was the best band I ever worked in. The musicians played wonderfully together, and were great overall so far as tone and everything were concerned. That was when I found out stock [arrangements] could sound very well if they were played very well. (World of Swing 320)

Clearly, all the hallmarks of which Heywood speaks are directly attributable to the band leader, Clarence Love. Dance remembers Jay McShann telling him that it was a Clarence Love performance "that really fired an ambition in [McShann] to play jazz" (World of Count 250). Of course, in the Jay McShann oral histories included here, he tells the story of seeing Clarence Love at a Manual Training High School assembly (Appendix D and E). John Wooley, music editor for the Tulsa World, knew Love as well as anyone, especially in Love's later years. Wooley writes, "Clarence Love's Orchestra was known as a 'sweet' band, in the Guy Lombardo style, rather than as a 'hot', jazz oriented group" (B4). In an article written after Love died in February, 1998, Wooley remembers a conversation in which Love told him, "When I put together my orchestra, I put it together like Guy Lombardo's. I didn't play Kansas City music then, you know what I mean?" ("Mr. Love").

Many mentions of Love in jazz histories are in lists of groups, or lists of bands someone famous played with at one time, or as examples for bigger issues. In his book From Jazz to Swing, Thomas Hennessey only explains Love in terms of some Southwestern groups who never enjoyed any national fame (152). However, it is exactly because Love's group was regional that Love speaks prominently in Nathan Pearson's

Goin to Kansas City. Among other anecdotes, Love recounts his birth, musical training life as a band leader, and comments on gangsters, touring the West, and vaudeville (246). Having spoken with Mr. Love personally three or four times before his death, it was his anecdotes that made him so listenable. He spoke with a tone of incredulity that not many people know his story, even though he was inducted into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame in 1990 alongside Jimmy Rushing, the Blue Devils, and fellow Tulsan Al Dennie. (When he found out I had a copy of McCarthy's Big Band Jazz, the book that gives Love the most attention, he let me know he was still mad at McCarthy for not returning his photos after they were published.) Clarence Love's words made me smile every time I talked with him. For that reason, parts of an unpublished letter of Love's to the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame are included here to let him give his own final statement regarding his historical significance:

Just read about Muskogee waking up to other types of music than country. . . . I was born there Jan. 26, 1908. My folks moved to K.C. in 1912, where I attended school. . . . My band play[ed] only sweet, jazz, swing - in our part, and always blues.

The question always asked [is] why so many Black and White musicians come from Muskogee? Why: No liquor in Oklahoma is number one cause. Kansas City in Missouri was wet and Pendergrass (sic) liked music and fun.

Muskogee had only three Black big bands but all three leaders, Clarence Love, T. Holder, and Jay McShann bands were formed in Kansas City. T. Holder's big band was later Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy, which was formed in Tulsa.

I am now the oldest (in time) not age, of the bands we called Road Bands. These were several big bands like in K.C. on the road daily. They were called Territory Bands. If you want to know more about me, go to the library and read McCarthy's Big Band story.

I am the only traveling band leader that had two big bands, one male and one

female, Clarence Love Male with Count Basie and Lester Young, and Female Darlings of Rhythm with Billy (sic) Holiday as vocalist.

I formed a band at age 14 in high school.

I managed Wes Montgomery.

Eddie Heywood was my pianist and many others [worked for me] who made it to the top, like Aunt Esther [Lawanda Page] with Redd Foxx.

Well, that's my beginning. I have more material if you desire.

Musically yours,

Clarence Love, the Legend (Circa 1997)

### **Walter "Foods" Thomas: Musician, Bandleader, Arranger**

Walter "Foods" Thomas, born February 10, 1907, in Muskogee, Oklahoma, played with Jelly Roll Morton, Cab Calloway, Don Redman, Count Basie and Benny Goodman. Brother of Joe Thomas, also born in Muskogee, Walter blazed the trail to New York where he played with Jelly Roll Morton from 1927-29, during which time he sent for his younger brother to take his place in Morton's group (Feather 440). Aaron Bell remembers "Foods" Thomas coming to Muskogee with Cab Calloway and staying in his home:

Before I got into the business Cab's band came through Muskogee, and I had a cousin named Arveece Andrews who was singing with Cab. So, she stayed at my house, and she had a husband with her, and he stayed. And, Foods Thomas stayed. Foods later went into the booking business. He worked with the Shaw Agency. He booked me in later years with a small group. He was a good tenor player.

(Appendix F)

More versatile than his brother musically, "Foods" played tenor saxophone, clarinet, and flute. Feather explains Thomas performed "all tenor and occasional flute solos on early Cab Calloway records" (440). After contributing such arrangements as "Minnie the Moocher" to Calloway's repertoire, Thomas left the band in 1943, playing for a brief



period with Don Redman, and then working as a band leader in 1944. By 1948, however, he put the horns up to pursue a successful career as an agent, manager, and music publisher (Kernfeld 1200). Feather indicates Thomas's clients as a manager included Dizzy Gillespie, and after joining Shaw Artists Agency as a booker of one night stands, Thomas ran a music publishing company with Cozy Cole (440). Like his younger brother for whom he certainly served as a role model, Walter Thomas is considered a competent side man who played his instruments professionally for twenty years with some of the biggest names in jazz, before entering the business side of the profession until his death August 26, 1981 (Larkin Virgin, 840),

### **Joseph "Joe" Thomas, Jr**

Both Joe Thomas, born December 23, 1908 in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and brother Walter "Footh" Thomas, left Muskogee as children and were raised in Topeka, Kansas. Although no written explanation exists for why the Thomas family left Oklahoma, Joe was born a year after statehood and Walter was born nine months before. One can imagine the family's high hopes for their children were not followed by satisfaction with their social situation. So, as Clarence Love's family did in 1912, the Thomas family moved away from the place they had obviously come to in order to build a life. Sadly, then, the Thomas brothers are a good example of the way African-Americans left the state they had pioneered because life must have been better somewhere else. The significance of both of these musicians, for the purposes of this study, is they were born in Muskogee, but more than likely left with their families because of the negative situation existing for African-Americans in Oklahoma at the time.

Joe Thomas, a tenor and alto saxophonist, moved to New York to play and record with Jelly Roll Morton in 1929. His brother, Walter, had already made it to the East Coast and was playing with Jelly Roll as early as 1927 (Carney 217, 219). Joe Thomas recorded with Morton in 1929 and 1930, played with Cozy Cole, and Blanche Calloway,

but ceased performing in the 1940s to become a vocal coach (Feather [Encyclopedia](#) 44). He did continue working in the music business, working as a vocal coach and in A & R departments of Decca and Victor Records from 1949-1951 (Carney [Oklahoma Jazz](#) 217). Leonard Feather also explains Thomas directed and wrote a number of R & B dates through the 1970s ([Encyclopedia](#) 44).

Determining critical information about Joe Thomas's career is difficult because no discography adequately distinguishes him from another Joe Thomas who became famous with Jimmie Lunceford's orchestra and was roughly the same age as the Muskogee-born Thomas (Kernfeld 1200). Not only that, as Kernfeld notes, "the sessions with Morton (on which he and Foots Thomas [played]) may not always be securely identified" (1200). This problem also arises in determining Thomas's death date, as no contemporary encyclopedia or other reference lists it, and a call to the Recording Industry Association of American simply refers one to the [All Music Guide](#), which does not list a death date. Aaron Bell is the last person known to have seen Thomas, and that was in roughly 1990. Bell did not know if Thomas is alive in 2000. None the less, Thomas was a competent side man who retired his horn and stayed in the business he loved for his entire working life, much the same path followed by his older brother, Walter "Foots" Thomas. The Thomas Brothers and Clarence Love are significant for their own musical careers, however, the circumstances surrounding their childhood departures from Muskogee also serves to exemplify the movement by African-Americans away from Oklahoma as a result of the state's initial segregationist policies. Combined with the five musicians who were born and stayed in Muskogee, along with the numerous other musicians who made Muskogee a base, the three men who left Muskogee and still became musicians exhibit the influence of music on those families from the time when they were in Muskogee, and are a testament to the tremendous possibility existing in that era of becoming a jazz musician in the Southwestern United States; and, as we have seen, even those musicians who left as

children, returned to Muskogee to perform and pass on their craft in one of the heretofore unexplored hot coals in the cultural hearth of American jazz.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Muskogee, Oklahoma produced at least eight significant jazz musicians because of the strength of the African-American community there, which began when the Muscogee (Creeks) brought their slaves to Indian Territory in the 1820s. In addition, some of the Muscogees encouraged their slaves to work toward freedom and education; and, as a result of the treaties with the United States after the Civil War, the Muscogee provided an excellent opportunity for all-Black communities to develop in the Creek Nation of Indian Territory, giving the freedmen allotments, money, and tribal membership. As a result, an economically strong, educated, and highly moral African-American community developed in and around Muskogee.

With the coming of statehood in 1907 and its racist legislation, many communities in Oklahoma chased people of African descent out of their towns, but in Muskogee, the numbers were big enough to intimidate the intimidators. Subsequently, African-American economic and social life in Muskogee continued to flourish throughout the period of statehood until World War II, albeit lessened by the general malaise caused by the agricultural failure of the 1920s and 1930s throughout Oklahoma and much of the United States. The African-American community of Muskogee, however, steeped in the musical traditions and experiences of the Southern African-American, provided a milieu in which musicians could be exposed to the literal evolution of jazz in the first third of the 20th century.

Furthermore, because of Muskogee's location, it was a prime midway point for musicians between Kansas City and Dallas, and because of its sizeable African-American population with means to support traveling shows, bands and artists, the city became a standard booking site for the traveling music circuit of the late 19th century through the end of World War II, which began with medicine and minstrel shows, followed by concert brass bands and operas, and then the roaming ragtime pianists, string bands, and hot

blowing and swinging territory bands, as well as gospel conventions and national caliber acts of the 1920s and 1930s. Even the elusive and itinerant blues musician Robert Johnson, who is given so much credit for influencing urban blues and rock, is known to have played in the area during the difficult days of the depression. These multitude of influences provided an incredibly varied environment in which musicians drew on a number of inspirations and performance requirements to serve the musical purpose of the moment, which in turn created versatile musicians who could freely explore their own ideas.

This environment, along with the formal training musicians received from private teachers and at Manual Training High School, and informal musical training the musicians received from traveling shows, itinerant musicians, and territory bands in Muskogee, is what created the possibility for jazz and jazz musicians to evolve. An interesting note of proof for Muskogee's significance as a jazz training ground lies in the careers of the musicians born there. Of the eight born in Muskogee, the ones who moved away at birth, Clarence Love and the Thomas Brothers, gave up their careers as players and became involved in the business side of the music industry. Of the five who remained to have their primary musical experiences in Muskogee, only bassist Aaron Bell did not continue as a major name in jazz throughout his life, although he is revered for his bass work with Duke Ellington, as well as his session work with some of the biggest names in jazz, and his twenty-five-year teaching career. The remaining four, Don Byas, Barney Kessel, Jay McShann, and now even Claude Williams, have cemented their names in the jazz history books for their work in the 20th century. Don Byas will always be known as one of the top tenor saxophonists of the 20th century for his ability to bridge the styles of swing and bebop. Barney Kessel, who grew up on South Second Street in the heart of the African-American business and entertainment district, grew out of that environment to be known as the third great jazz guitarist of the 20th century, after Django Reinhardt and Charlie Christian, and may forever be known as "the" improvisationlist of jazz guitar. Jay

McShann not only allowed the young Charlie Parker to experiment and flourish for the first time in McShann's blues-based big band, his piano work is an amalgamation of rag time, boogie woogie, blues, and swing, all of which he picked up in Muskogee and later in Kansas City. McShann's own prolific career was almost overshadowed by his connection to Parker, but by 2000 he was considered the primary living proponent of the Kansas City sound, and his piano playing sits firmly at the place where blues and jazz intersect, as it did in the city from which he came. Claude Williams is now known as the primary living jazz violinist. The first notes of any blues he plays summon up all the hardship of slavery, forced removal, and segregation. His spunky approach to jazzing up popular songs grows directly out of the late 19th and early 20th string band tradition, and his current work also resounds with a century's worth of experience playing the blues and converting it into jazz. Williams's track on the compact disc included here provides an excellent example for his foundation in that technique (Track 3). Furthermore, Claude Williams, along with Jay McShann and Aaron Bell still have more music in them as of 2000, and a large amount of unreleased Barney Kessel material is also on the horizon.

Although this study has attempted to provide a partial picture of Muskogee's African-American society from settlement of Three Forks to World War II in order to explain how jazz and jazz musicians developed in the area, further study is necessary into the cultural history of Three Forks, as well as the cultural history of Muskogee, Oklahoma to determine a more detailed version of the African-American society of Oklahoma in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, much more research should be done in the area of Oklahoma's African-American newspapers, which contain a multitude of history, anecdotes, advertisements, and opinions which have yet to be contextualized for their historic significance. At least, a biography should be written of Muskogee's "Black Tiger," W. H. Twine, and, someday, a screenplay should certainly be considered by any filmmaker who wishes to tell an inspiring chapter of American history. Of course, more detective work is necessary to unearth more details about the "colored band" that fired up

the territory in 1904, and a more thorough search of the Muskogee Sanborn Maps should be conducted in the national archives in order to more fully understand the evolution of the African-American community in Muskogee, which may be seen in the future as a center, or at least an ultimate paradigm, for the African-American experience for the eighty years from the end of the Civil War to the end of World War II, neither of which solved the weighty conflict of racism that still exists in the United States as of the present.

The jazz of Muskogee and Oklahoma should be even more prized for its occurrence under the negative social environment that Oklahoma became after statehood. If any benefit exists from that period in state history, it lies in two places: first, in the groundwork that was laid for the African-American civil rights movement in 1950s Oklahoma; second, the notion that often in oppressed societies, the artistic product is more valuable because it comes from the pain of existence under less than favorable conditions, and cleanses the performer's soul by exorcising negative feelings and promulgating positive feelings via that emotional release. After all, one does not play the blues to feel worse, but to gain a cathartic experience by expressing the sadness one feels. Perhaps, no better example of this is can be found than in the old Muscogee hymn included with this study, a song whose lyrics probably were composed on "the long walk" the Muscogee made to the new Creek Nation in Oklahoma with their slaves, but whose melody certainly must be even older, be it African, or American Indian in origin. Although definitive statements have been made by ethnomusicologists regarding the influence of African musical traditions on North American Indian music, more research should be conducted on the musical interaction between these two groups. If indeed African slaves acquired some of the musical traditions of the Muscogee, and merged the Muscogee ceremonial music with their own tribal musics long before being exposed to many more diverse European musical influences in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, then a rethinking of the earliest influences of blues and jazz must be undertaken. Then, perhaps, scholars and the general public can more fully understand how African slaves blended those

traditions with language and feelings common to their own experience, and thereby created the sound that flowed through the African-American churches, dance halls, political meetings, and Emancipation Day picnics in Muskogee, Oklahoma, on its way to becoming the original American art form of jazz.



## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Because of the scarcity of cohesive information and an alarming amount of wrong information with regard to Muskogee and jazz, a number of works must serve as beginning points for understanding both the biographical aspects of the jazz musicians from Muskogee, as well the historical context in which they grew and flourished.

### **Primary and Secondary Materials**

Primary materials used in this dissertation included Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, United States federal records, Oklahoma state records, Muskogee city directories, newspaper accounts from the period, and several oral histories to include the unpublished interviews presented here. Secondary materials included a number of sources in the subjects of Oklahoma, American Indians, African-Americans/Blacks, and United States history, as well as music history texts, primarily about jazz, and references to the relatively new field of music geography.

### **Geography of Music Materials**

For a more thorough understanding of the regional influences on the jazz musicians from Muskogee, as well as the conceptual underpinnings of music and historical geography, several texts must be consulted. To begin with, Carl O. Sauer's explanation of the roots of historical geography is intrinsic to understanding the nature of this study. Sauer defines the theme of a culture hearth as "the inquiry into the localization of culture origins" (12). Sauer's definition guides our inquiry into the notion of place and why Muskogee itself was so wealthy in jazz musicians in proportion to other cities much larger in size. Some exploration into the ethnic makeup of Oklahoma in 1900 may be gleaned from Michael Roark's article "Searching for the Hearth: Culture Areas of Oklahoma." Although Roark provides interesting population and birthplace data of Oklahomans to explain its diversity, his commentary on the foundation of Oklahoma's Black communities

in eastern Oklahoma is particularly thin. In addition, George Carney's Sounds of People and Places: A Geography of American Folk and Popular Music is a necessary starting point for discussing how a region produces a certain type of music. Sounds of People and Places provides the reader with a historical overview of the field of music geography, research categories and approaches, as well as suggestions for a multi-disciplinary approach to research in the area. Several articles in this book serve as excellent paradigms for the exploration of music from a specific geographical area. However, Carney's article in the Chronicles of Oklahoma, "Deep Second to 52nd Street," is a must beginning point for any student of Oklahoma jazz. The article is a primary and secondary reference throughout this dissertation, as it provides a thorough cultural and geographical overview of Oklahoma jazz from its multi-cultural roots through 1945. Carney discusses the origins and careers of forty-eight jazz artists born in Oklahoma, providing social profiles of each musician. Carney also explores the outlets for jazz in the individual municipalities of Tulsa and Oklahoma City, as well as for the rest of the region. In addition, he defines the territorial bands and explains how Oklahomans gained from the professional opportunities that existed in those groups. Carney explains why jazz musicians had to leave the state and why their roots have gone largely unnoticed by traditional jazz scholarship. Finally, Carney explains the various reasons why Oklahoma was such a fertile ground for the production of jazz artists, citing the state's multi-cultural beginnings, the cities that served as training grounds for Oklahoma jazz artists, to include Muskogee, and the many state-based territorial bands which needed musicians. Carney's article should be considered mandatory reading for the study of Oklahoma jazz.

In addition to Carney's work, researchers should be aware of the Oklahoma State Geography Department's Reconnaissance Level Survey of a Portion of Muskogee Oklahoma, produced under contract for the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1998. The study identifies individual properties and potential historic districts that either meet eligibility criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, warrant further

study for possible inclusion, or are ineligible and require no further investigation (4).

Through this study, one can gain some understanding about the various historical eras of Muskogee from 1872 to 1955 by examining the existing architecture in the city. The limitation for this dissertation's purposes, however, is that not much significant African-American architecture is left standing, most of it having been demolished for the federal building on Okmulgee and Main, the overpass directly south on Elgin, or Arrowhead Mall to the north, which was built in the 1980s. The study does summarize the African-American history of the area, but only in one paragraph, and does not explain the larger story of the African-American experience in the area, primarily because no structures exist as a foundation for discussing it. The Reconnaissance Level Survey does say, "Muskogee had a substantial Black community from the outset that grew during the 1890s with new employment opportunities" (205). However, I disagree with the principal investigators' suggestion "that education, style, and fashion were, at the least, not high on the community's list of priorities" (263). In any number of late 19th and early 20th century newspapers from Muskogee, we see articles and advertisements for grand civic events, operas, and balls. With regards to fashion, African-American women, at least, were buying the finest clothes that could be shipped in from the East, and the upper crust African-American men always look very dapper in both staged and casual photographs. Also, Barney Kessel's father operated a tailor and shoe store on South Second, and many other clothes stores succeeded in Muskogee as a result of its importance as a mercantile center.

As for education, as the earliest Sandborn maps indicate for Muskogee, in 1886 the Harrell International Institute served as an educational facility. By 1894, the Sanborn Map indicates a "Negro School" on South Second and the "Indian Mission School" around the northwest corner of Okmulgee, with the Harrell Institute having grown to kitchen and dining rooms in the basement, school rooms on the first floor, and dormitories on the second floor. In addition, as noted later in this study, the Sango Institute opened on South

Second Street for the education of African-Americans in 1904. Of course, Manual Training High School, where Aaron Bell and Jay McShann had primary musical experiences and where students were required to memorize Shakespeare, is not discussed either. As opposed to the investigators' findings, enough evidence does exist to conclude that the African-American community, as well as the Muskogee Nation, provided and encouraged the pursuit of educational opportunities in the area. Furthermore, the investigators' propose an outrageous notion that "some people might further conclude from this that the community lacked an educational level to implement or appreciate a more sophisticated existence" (263). Nothing could be further from the truth. Muskogee's African-American community was bustling and thriving, as well as being an intellectually and politically active group of people. Unfortunately, no architectural evidence exists to support this milieu; however, the primary documents of The Muskogee Cimiter and The Wagoner Echo, along with the secondary source histories of African-Americans in Oklahoma by Franklin, Teall, and Tolson, all verify the high civic and moral values in place during the pre-statehood era of Muskogee. In the case of Muskogee, no buildings exist to prove these high values, but researchers should not base historical theses about Muskogee entirely on existing buildings and the accepted histories of Muskogee by Faulk, Foreman, and West. One must carefully review the political factors that went into the dissolution of Muskogee's African-American business districts before issuing any blanket statements about the town's history. This trend in scholarship has reduced Muskogee's significance even in reference to the area's all-Black town movement, even though this dissertation shows that Muskogee was the hub of the movement, the nexus through which the trains, merchandise, newspapers, recruiting materials, leading African-American citizens, and ones with just hopes, passed, and then returned to for supplies.

Finally, as not to take too much issue with Oklahoma State University's Reconnaissance Level Survey, the study does a very important job of paralleling the history of Muskogee's population and civic growth with its existing structures. The

overall condensation of the history of Muskogee is very matter of fact, for the facts that have been checked. Again, the historical references are limited to the Anglo-Americans, Faulk, Foreman, and West, so the perspective is somewhat limited with regards to the total picture of Muskogee's development. The study has also chosen some different reasons for development of Muskogee than the dissertation does, however, as the dissertation focuses primarily on the African-American development of the city. Nonetheless, the overall study, its annotated bibliography, and its methodology make it an important contribution to Muskogee's physical memory, but not necessarily its complete actual past.

Rudi Blesh's Shining Trumpets is focused largely on the beginnings of jazz, but contains fascinating personal observances of rough boogie-woogie string bands in Oklahoma City in 1913 or 1914 (303), the kind which Claude Williams probably would have performed in as a child in 1918 with his uncle. Blesh also provides a good overview of the Southwestern jazz tradition as a whole. The overly erudite Jazz, by Rex Harris, is written in a very stuffy, scholarly way and seems to consider the rough hewn sounds of the Southwest as little more than an "injection" into the bigger picture of jazz, but he does make the very good point that what happened in Kansas City was also going on in other parts of the country, and what we call the "Kansas City style" could just as easily be called the Omaha, Dallas or Minneapolis style (183). Jazz is an important collection of jazz essays edited by Nat Hentoff. Specifically "Kansas City and the Southwest," by Franklin Driggs, is must reading as Driggs shows how jazz was taking root in the Southwest around the same time as it was in New Orleans (191). Driggs does what had not been until his essay, which was to give the Southwest and the musicians who came from there a fairly thorough look, including McShann, and Driggs may be the first writer to start accounting for the region's significance. Schuller's chapter on the Southwest is also very important since he provides musical scores, lineages of groups, and a map showing the important cities in the development of Southwestern jazz, however, Muskogee is not

included ("Southwest" 281-82). He points out the region had an indigenous music, ragtime, and that is one of the reasons it was able to develop a unique sound ("Southwest" 282).

Another helpful resource for understanding the Kansas City scene which shaped Byas, Love, McShann, and Williams includes Martin Williams's essay "What Happened in Kansas City?" in which Williams puts forth the idea Kansas City contributed as much to jazz as New Orleans did and Jay McShann's orchestra with Charlie Parker was the final major event of the Kansas City period. Williams also takes a good look at the Kansas city "riff" style of jazz. A primary source for understanding the region's music history is Ross Russell's Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest, which devotes chapters to understanding Kansas City's social and political climate, territorial bands, Jay McShann's orchestra, and Russell also argues bebop is the legacy of the Kansas City and, therefore, the whole Southwest's tradition. Finally, for an example of how a city's history becomes its music scene, Grace Lichtenstein's Musical Gumbo: The Music of New Orleans serves as somewhat of a model for this study because it begins with a regional history before surveying its individual musical products, as well as stylistic trends and personal stories within those trends. In addition, Musical Gumbo also provides a discography of New Orleans music, current proponents of the style, a directory of New Orleans music resources, as well as museums and archives where students of jazz can pursue more details of the genre's history.

### **Jazz History and Critical Materials**

Referred to as the "best single work on jazz," The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz, edited by Kernfeld, is possibly the most relied upon reference work for short but thorough biographical entries for jazz artists and genres. All of the Muskogee artists but Clarence Love are included in Grove, as he was known primarily for his work as a bandleader and clubowner. Love's history is equally important as he brought his band to Muskogee to play, and his oral history fills in a lot of gaps in knowledge about Muskogee's jazz scene

and other cultural history. Grove also includes bibliographical lists and selected discographies for all artists listed. Chilton's Who's Who of Jazz is an important, and much cheaper, cross reference for Grove, but it leaves out Bell, Kessel, and Love. Another good resource for critical material is Carr's Jazz: The Essential Companion. This work is formatted so the first part of an entry contains salient biographical material, followed by a brief, but fairly accurate critical assessment of each artist. If anything is left to be desired from Carr, it is the obvious fact some of the wording in the entries is from some of the sources already included here, but the criticism is usually written in a fresh way. Byas, McShann, and Kessel are discussed by Carr.

Leonard Feather's three encyclopedias also prove useful as reference sources. The Encyclopedia of Jazz gives a solid historical survey of jazz, provides a chronology of important jazz events and an anatomy of jazz in which Feather provides notation examples of important tenets and musical fixtures of the jazz idiom. Also included is a biographical section in which Bell, Byas, Kessel, McShann, and the Thomas Brothers are discussed. What separates Feather from the previously mentioned sources is his inclusion of the last known address for each musician as of the publication date. Since Feather's Encyclopedia was published in 1960, two subsequent books by him have updated the information where necessary and carry the titles of Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Sixties and Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Seventies. All three of the encyclopedias are superseded by the 1999 posthumous publication of Feather's The Biographical Encyclopedia of Jazz, edited by Ira Gitler, but addresses listed in the previous editions are not included and not all of the entries are updated.

Several critical handbooks, encyclopedias, and jazz guides are necessary for understanding the overall critical significance of the jazz musicians of Muskogee. Panassie's Guide to Jazz, translated from French, is useful in determining some international response to Byas, Kessel, and McShann in the 1950s. Ulanov's Handbook of Jazz, from the same period, is also an interesting look at various interpretations of jazz,

e.g., "The Language of Jazz," "The Morality of Jazz," and "A Fifteen Inch Shelf of Jazz History." Ulanov provides short critical appraisals of Byas, Kessel, and McShann. Thirty years later Barry McCrae, a British jazz scholar, wrote a Jazz Handbook, which is laid out in a cluttered fashion but provides some solid 1980s viewpoints on Byas, and McShann. Kessel has not earned his own entry in McCrae's opinion, but is cited as an influence on John McLaughlin and George Benson. What is helpful about this book is the "Databank" section in the back of the book which lists jazz record labels, terms, and all kinds of jazz clubs, magazines and books.

Four books stand out in the 1990s, offering contemporary perspectives on the jazz musicians from Muskogee. 1994's All Music Guide to Jazz, edited by Ron Wynn, et.al., is a good biographical and discographical reference, however, the Thomas brothers nor Clarence Love receive their own entries. The Thomas brothers are referred to in other artists' sections and the index directs readers to those entries, however, as noted elsewhere, one must be wary of entries or references to Joe Thomas since at least three men were active musicians under that name in middle 20th century jazz. A third edition of the All Music Guide to Jazz was published in 1998, but only Claude Williams' entry has any kind of update from the previous edition. 1995's Blackwell Guide to Recorded Jazz, edited by Barry Kernfeld, is a collection of Barry Kernfeld's jazz essays. Kernfeld writes very helpful essays on Byas and McShann, but only mentions Kessel, the Thomas brothers, and Williams in recording session lineups, which are in themselves helpful for biographical purposes. Bell and Love, however, are left out completely. Also published in 1995, the Schwann CD Review Digest offers some very interesting insight into the popular reputations of Byas, Kessel, McShann and Williams in the context of all non-classical music categories. Particularly useful is the inclusion of quoted criticisms from hard-to-locate sources such as Jazz Journal International and Hi-Fi News and Record Review. Schwann's publication is an annual review and seems to be the best evolving critical source for new releases by Muskogee's jazz artists, still living as of 2000. The 1998 publication,



Music Hound: Jazz, The Essential Album Guide, edited by Steve Holtje and Nancy Anbn Lee, is not only useful for its entries on Byas, Kessel, McShann, and Williams (Bell, Love, and the Thomas Brothers are not included), but also for the tremendous list of books, magazines, newsletters, web sites, record labels, radio stations, music festivals, roots index, and category index. The book also comes with a compact disc, and although none of the Muskogee artists are included, Chet Baker, born in Yale, Oklahoma does have a track on the disc. Music Hound's references list each individual artist's best discs, as well as out-of-print recordings worth seeking out. Finally, Jazz: The Rough Guide is helpful for short critical appraisals of Byas, Kessel, and McShann, and The Virgin Encyclopedia of Jazz surveys Byas, Kessel, McShann, "Foods" Thomas, and Williams.

To further understand the musical eras and foundations from which the jazz musicians of Muskogee came, four works give a good overview of the development of jazz and swing at the global level. Newton's The Jazz Scene is a very readable and informative overview of jazz in which Byas and McShann are mentioned briefly. Ulliamy's Jazz and Blues is a basic, but fairly accurate, historical text and is valuable mostly for the associations it makes between jazz and blues. For an excellent historical look at the big band era, McCarthy's Big Band Jazz is a wide ranging look at many of the bands who have been forgotten through the years and who shaped the big picture of jazz from the early 20th century up to the end of the big band era just before World War II. The "Territory Band" chapter is particularly helpful in pulling together a sense of the Southwestern and Midwestern United States jazz scene. McCarthy's book is also the most helpful in finding out about Clarence Love, whose picture is even on the back dust cover of the book. McCarthy's shortcoming is a lack of critical content, however, and that is why Schuller's Swing Era is an essential companion to this period. Schuller writes from the perspective of the musician and composer he is, providing a number of valuable musical insights which may be difficult for the layman, but indispensable to the musician after a deeper understanding of jazz. Schuller discusses Byas and McShann in detail, and mentions

Kessel in the context of his work with Billie Holliday and Artie Shaw. Also included in The Swing Era are mentions of the Thomas Brothers and Claude Williams and bandleaders for whom they played.

Finally, to begin working individually with the jazz artists from Muskogee, at least four seminal research tools exist. First and foremost is George Carney's Oklahoma Jazz Artists: A Biographical Dictionary, available in the open stacks and in special collections at the Oklahoma State University Edmond Low Library. This self-published manuscript lists general profiles of Oklahoma jazz artists, including when and where they were born, demographic profiles, family histories, role of social institutions in their careers, amateur and professional opportunities in Oklahoma, achievements outside of Oklahoma, and Oklahoma jazz musicians' contributions to American jazz. In addition, the monograph includes maps and tables which illustrate distribution of Oklahoma jazz artists' birthplaces, origins by city size and decade of birth, early outlets for Oklahoma jazz, Oklahoma-based jazz bands, the ballroom circuit of Oklahoma Territorial Bands, migration routes of musicians from Oklahoma, tours and performances on the international level by Oklahoma's jazz musicians, and an Oklahoma All-Stars jazz band. Also, a bibliography and discography for each musician is listed after the biographies. Carney's text stops in 1992, which leaves out the better part of the 1990s and the continued careers of Kessel, McShann and Williams, as well as the final years of Clarence Love's life, or the whereabouts and activities of Aaron Bell. All of these gaps are filled in with the critical and biographical essays in this study. Carney's listings are the most comprehensive to date, however, and his Biographical Dictionary should be considered must reading for students of Oklahoma jazz history, alongside the aforementioned article written from it, "Oklahoma Jazz: Deep Second to 52nd Street," which synthesizes much of the material. Carney's Biographical Dictionary supersedes the jazz section of his earlier work, Oklahoma's Folk Music Traditions: A Resource Guide, but does not lessen that work's importance for finding additional source material on all of Oklahoma's traditions, which

must be considered in the overall picture of the state's music history. This guide is a sometimes annotated bibliography and discography of Native American music, blues and jazz, Woody Guthrie, western swing, and bluegrass, as those entities took shape in Indian Territory and Oklahoma.

A final bibliography to be consulted, as it contains some listings Carney does not for the Muskogee jazz musicians, is Carner's Jazz Performers: An Annotated Bibliography of Biographical Materials, published in 1990. This work is nowhere near the detail of Carney's with reference to Oklahoma artists, but does list the whereabouts of at least one biographical sketch, a critical view and interview with each artist, and a career overview of each musician. Also included in the book is a supplementary bibliography of general works, histories, textbooks, illustrated books, and reference works on jazz.

Finally, the one other book that should be consulted by students of Oklahoma's musical heritage is William Savage's Singing Cowboys and All That Jazz. Although published in 1983, and that is one of its limitations, Savage gives a fairly thorough and concise look at the musicians who have come from the state and discusses jazz in a chapter called "The Oklahoma All-Stars" (89-106).

### **Jazz Periodicals and a Web Site**

The primary jazz periodical for history and jazz criticism is Downbeat magazine, which began publishing in 1933, and therefore is very useful for tracking all jazz musicians of significance from the big band era forward. Several other publications, such as JazzBeat, Playboy, and Esquire, are also useful for determining national and international status for jazz musicians and their work.

One web site can be particularly helpful for seeing the most complete discographies available of the artists in this study. WWW.ALLMUSIC.COM not only lists every release known by these musicians, but also indicates whether or not the recording is currently available. In addition, the site also includes other artists on whose recordings the

Muskogee musicians play. The biographical information on the site for each musicians is from Wynn's All Music Guide to Jazz, but the review information for individual albums is not as thorough on line as it is in the book.

### **Oklahoma History Materials**

Although a number of historical materials are available to a researcher, my particular research has been conducted almost entirely in Oklahoma. Therefore, I have not visited the national repositories of the Smithsonian Institution, nor the Library of Congress. However, I have done a thorough search of Oklahoma's primary universities and state historical archives. Of particular interest is the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, and the territorial newspaper archives at the Oklahoma State Historical Society. Both places provide a wealth of information on the history of both Indian Territory and Oklahoma before and after statehood in 1907. However, the searches done for this study were on Three Forks and Muskogee's African-American history, as well any musical events in the area from 1795-1945. As a result of my focus and Muskogee not being considered exclusively and all-Black town of Oklahoma, information on Muskogee's African-American history is relatively limited, compared to the other studies done on the African-American history of the state. Except for the Twine Collection at the Western History Collections and what can be culled from the state's early newspapers, more research needs to be done in national archives to try and uncover more of the story.

The primary periodical for the study of Oklahoma is produced by the state's historical society. The Chronicles of Oklahoma began documenting the state's history in 1921 and only recently has provided serious documentation of the state's music history. Through the Annotated Guide to The Chronicles of Oklahoma 1921-1994, one can glean a number of essays that are of tremendous use on the settlement of the Three Forks area, the subsequent evolution of the area in to Muskogee, and, finally, many articles on the state's

African-American history. The guide is divided up into sections that allows one to search for all published articles during the years listed on subjects such as African-Americans. Sadly, however, no compilation of articles on music is listed, mainly because there were not too many in the years noted.

At least three general history books should be recommended for beginning study. Oklahoma: New Views on the Forty Sixth State, edited by Anne and Wayne Morgan, details the evolution of the state of Oklahoma. One of the most helpful chapters is one by Rennard Strickland, "Oklahoma's Story: Recording the History of the Forty-sixth State," in which he glosses and critiques the great number of books on the state's history in a bibliographic essay. Strickland "attempts to guide interested readers through Oklahoma's historical literature and also [looks] at some of the great historical themes which are worked out in Oklahoma" (205). One book in particular that Strickland believes anyone studying the state should read is Oklahoma: A History, by Anne and Wayne Morgan. This book offers the reader a historical guide to places of historical interest that still stand, along with essays on the land of Oklahoma, "Indian Culture," white settlement, statehood, and social change in the state as a result of statehood. Also, their chapter on Oklahoma's modernization is helpful for explaining what happened to the state's population as a result of national trends. However, the Morgans vastly understate the racial strife in the state, most noticeable in the scant information about the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, and the bizarre interpretation of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma. Finally, for maps of the state, the Historical Atlas of Oklahoma, by John Morris, et.al., is a book made up entirely of maps depicting the landforms, population patterns, tribal nation boundaries, historical sites, etc. This book is a must for understanding the way in which history interacts with topography in Oklahoma's development. The book contains maps for significant historical periods in Oklahoma's history, as well as other useful geological, political, military, and population maps.

If one is interested in doing further research on the general cultural and musical history of the state, at least four sources should be checked. Well-known historian Angie Debo writes about some cultural history and some of Oklahoma's music in Oklahoma: Foot-loose and Fancy Free. The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma is another resource for researchers interested in some of the facts gathered by the WPA on Oklahoma. Chapters on "Music" and "Folklore and Folkways" are interesting reading, but do not help out much in understanding the state's jazz history. Finally, The Culture of Oklahoma, edited by Howard Stein and Robert Hill, not only explores the cultural identity of the state, but also provides a chapter entitled "Black Oklahomans and the Question of 'Oklahomaness': The People Who Weren't Invited to Share the Dream," by James Smallwood and Crispin A. Phillips. These authors provide a solid thumbnail sketch of African-American history of the state from the time the first people of African descent accompanied Spanish explorers in the region as early as 1540 (49). Sub-sections discuss the high hopes African-Americans held for the new state, their subsequent disappointments facing deteriorating race relations, and then the civil rights movement in the state. The essay's timeline tops out in the early 1990s.

With regards to African-American history, Jimmie Franklin's Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma is a good place to begin understanding the tremendous history of African-Americans in Indian Territory and Oklahoma. Another helpful text for understanding the connections between the African-Americans and the Muscogees during the times of slavery is Daniel Littlefield's Africans and Creeks: From the Colonial Period to the Civil War. Chapters on the beginnings of slavery through the Civil War and emancipation are very helpful in understanding the way in which Muscogee Creeks and African-American slaves co-existed under less than ideal conditions. Another important resource for the slavery period is The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives, republished in 1996 with some interviews that were not included in the previous editions of Oklahoma slave narratives. Several oral histories of the slavery period are documented here that

provide insight into the social and cultural milieu of the period and are must reading for a student of the era. Any researcher into the African-American history of Muskogee should read deeply into the various communities' newspapers of the territory and post-statehood period. The four African-American newspapers publishing in Muskogee before 1900 include the Muskogee Sun ((1893); the Pioneer (1898); the Muskogee Cimiter (1889); and the Baptist College (Williams "The Black Press" 316). Other books of importance on African-American history in Oklahoma include the following: Arthur Tolson's The Black Oklahomans: A History, 1541-1972 helps explain the status of Africans in Muscogee society both in Georgia before removal and in Indian Territory, and how slaves fared during the Civil War era. Tolson also explores the evolving 19th century African-American societies in chapters titled "The Black Oklahoma Towns," and provides both background and aftermath of Jim Crow laws in Oklahoma. Finally, Tolson details the racism of Oklahoma from 1907-1939. Although Tolson's book is a significant resource for the purely historical aspects of Oklahoma's African-American history, music is not a focus of the text. Taken from An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before: Alternative Views of Oklahoma History, Jimmie Lewis Franklin's essay "Black Oklahomans and Sense of Place" is very helpful for illustrating the idea of African-Americans not wanting to leave a state they had helped create. Kaye Teall's Black History in Oklahoma: A Resource Book is a very ambitious and important contribution to scholarship on African-American history in Oklahoma. Although Teall's text was published by the Oklahoma City Schools in 1971, this resource provides many excellent first-hand accounts of the African-American experience in the Indian and Oklahoma Territories from government documents, obscure journals, letters, and newspapers. Another helpful resource for a thorough survey of African-Americans in Oklahoma is Gene Aldrich's Black Heritage in Oklahoma. Finally, Leon Litwack's Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow, provides a larger all around picture of African-Americans in the Southern United States, although references to Oklahoma are limited.

As for studying more about the Muscogee (Creek), a number of excellent texts help to understand both their history in the Southeastern United States, and their subsequent forced removal and establishment of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. To begin with, the Creek Source Book, edited by William Sturtevant, is essential to understanding the history of the Muscogees, as well as much of its ceremonial music from an ethnomusicologists point of view. Following that, several other books are illuminating, such as Angie Debo's The Road to Disappearance: A History of the Creek Indians, along with another book of hers, And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes. Grant Foreman's The Five Civilized Tribes is also useful. Both of the last two books include material about the Cherokees, which is important since Muskogee is right on the border of the two tribal nations. Both tribes experienced "long walks" or "trails of tears," and both tribes included mixed-bloods and full-bloods who maintained plantation cultures by using African slaves. For a good understanding of how some Muscogees and African-Americans fared in the Civil War, Laurence Hauptman's Between Two Fires: American Indians in the Civil War provides some worthwhile information. Finally, for a good overview of the period after the Civil War and up until statehood, Jeffrey Burton's Indian Territory and the United States 1866-1906 provides a detailed overview of the court cases, governmental policies, and various state movements that contributed to Oklahoma becoming a state.

As for Muskogee itself, Muskogee: City and County, by Odie B. Faulk and edited by Muskogee historian C.W. "Dub" West, provides anecdotal information gleaned from Muskogee's newspapers and many of the historical references already mentioned. The book is a cursory, but thorough, look at the area's topography, the arrival of the tribes from the Southeastern United States, the birth of Muskogee, the discussion of Muskogee as a state capital and county seat, the oil boom, and the depression and events leading up to World War II. Although the book does not help much with jazz history, a wealth of photographs from the late 19th and early 20th century make this book a "must see" to



understand how Muskogee looked from its inception as a town in 1876 up through the 1970s. Along the same lines is C. W. West's Fort Gibson: Gateway to the West, which is also compiled from newspaper articles and private and public photo collections. The book does make an effort to include some African-American history, which is mentioned in Chapter Four. C. W. West also wrote another book about Muskogee that is largely taken from Muskogee Phoenix-Times Democrat newspaper articles called Muscogee, I.T.: The Queen City of the Southwest, 1872-1972. Unfortunately, the book does not provide much insight into the African-American community, nor its culture. The same problem exists with Grant Foreman's Muskogee: The Biography of an Oklahoma Town and John P. Benedict's Muskogee and Northeastern Oklahoma. For an insightful look into the way in which the M, K, & T Railroad contributed to the founding of Muskogee and the rowdy evolution of the settlement through its days as a lawless frontier town, see V.V. Masterson's The KATY Railroad and the Last Frontier. To really look into the day to day African-American experience in Muskogee during the second half of the 19th century up through statehood, the town's African-American newspapers should be the researcher's first step, aside from the aforementioned books specializing on Oklahoma's African-American history.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY INTERVIEW  
WITH CLARENCE LOVE

## **Oklahoma Historical Society Interview with Clarence Love**

Recorded 1 Aug. 1983, Tulsa, Oklahoma

CL: Clarence Love, Bandleader

JT: Joe Todd, Oklahoma Historical Society

CL: My name is Clarence Love. At present I'm the pioneer coordinator at the Pioneer Plaza here in Tulsa, Oklahoma at 901 N. Elgin. I'm a native Oklahoman, born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, January the 26th, 1908. I was a bandleader, twenty-five years on the road, and had very many celebrities during my period as a bandleader that worked with me, which later on you will hear as the interview goes on. My dad was named H.P. Love. He was a Mississippian. My mother was Nattie Love. Her maiden name was Smith and she was from South Carolina. [My father] was a barber by trade. He owned a barber shop and pool hall in Kansas City for a number of years.

JT: Was he a barber in Muskogee?

CL: In Muskogee he worked for a company that went by the name of the Dawes Commission (laughs). He was a custodian, I think.

JT: Did he ever talk about his days at the Dawes Commission?

CL: No, I learned that from my mother. The Dawes Commission was a place in Muskogee that was in a government building. She never did tell me very much about it. I don't know very much about it at all.

JT: Do you have any childhood memories of Muskogee?

CL: Yes, I have. Well, I was born at 560 North 11th Street in Muskogee, in the white neighborhood, a complete white neighborhood. We were the only black family there. I was delivered by a white doctor during that time. His name was Doctor Hughes and he lived in front of us. The house was completely modern, back in 1908. People don't know we had gas, electric lights, fireplaces, and indoor toilets, 1908. I also had a pony called Pearl given to me. My granddaddy owned a hotel there by the name of the Smith Hotel. I guess during that era he was considered wealthy. We had beautiful peach trees,

persimmon trees, and a beautiful yard. It was an eleven room house, two stories. I played with the kids, my friends, who lived on the east side of us, the Wright family. They were white and Mr. Wright had three kids I can remember, twin girls, and Arch Wright Jr. whom I haven't seen in fifty years. That's about all I can remember because my daddy left and went to Kansas City, and in 1912 he sent for my mother, my sister, and I.

JT: Why did he move to Kansas City?

CL: Well there wasn't anything in Muskogee, like it still is, and he left for a better arrangement in Kansas City. That's why he left.

JT: How did you travel to Kansas City?

CL: In a Jim Crow car, which was a smoking car for the white men and negroes had to ride in that car. It had red seats and I had on a little Buster Brown suit. Kansas didn't have a Jim Crow law. You could go to school in Kansas. In Oklahoma, you couldn't. It was halfway like that in Missouri, but it wasn't as bad. It wasn't bad to live in Oklahoma. Since Oklahoma had just finished being an Indian Territory, it had US Marshalls and everything here. Of all the places, in Muskogee you could live anywhere, but that was Oklahoma. Kansas City was a little different. After we got there, they had black neighborhoods, but you couldn't live anywhere in Kansas City. That was a difference in the states. You had to change cars in Kansas, at the Kansas line, and then you could stay in the car on into Missouri.

JT: Do you mean you wound up in Kansas City, Kansas, or Kansas City, Missouri.

CL: Missouri.

JT: How long did you stay there?

CL: Well, that was 1912. I went to kindergarten, elementary school, the seventh grade, and they didn't have junior highs in those days. From the seventh grade, I went into Lincoln High School. Now in this high school, one of the differences from Oklahoma is we had to take military training in ROTC. From my freshman year up until my senior year

I played mellophone in the band. They had one of the greatest teachers of any blacks in the United States. M.L. Dawson was my teacher for four years in high school.

JT: What was he like?

CL: One of the greatest Black musicians that ever lived. Only man I'd ever seen who could play a duet with himself on the trombone. I played violin in the school orchestra, and that's where I organized my own dance band in high school. I had to play for the junior-senior prom ahead of me, and I played for my own junior-senior prom with my band.

JT: When did you decide you wanted to be a musician?

CL: To tell you the truth, I got inspiration from a guy named Blind Boone, a black pianist. My mama took me to his concert in Kansas City, and I listened to him. He could play all instruments. That was the first guy. There was a bandleader there I really idolized by the name of George E. Lee. He had a dance band and I wanted to be like George Lee. So, after finishing high school there was another thing that made me want to be a bandleader. During my vacation I worked as a busboy, and I didn't know what a busboy was. So, I got this job as a busboy and I guess I was about sixteen. I bused the tables that were about four or five feet long, and you had to go get the dishes. One guy was in front of me and we were carrying trays full of dishes to the back. When they closed that evening I had to mop up. I went home for dinner and I didn't go back. I didn't even go back to get my check. I said if this is what you got to go through, I'm going to be something. I'd taken up mechanical drawing in high school. I was going to be an architect. I went to Creighton Technical School in Chicago, but my dad didn't have any money, so I only stayed there six months and I came back to Kansas City and got into the music industry in 1929.

JT: How did you organize your first band?

CL: One day I was downtown in Kansas City, and there was a lady who had a booking agency over the Main Street Theater there downtown, named Amy Cox. I went down

there and told Ms. Cox I had a band if she had a job open, and she did at the Egyptian Club. I didn't have a band then, nor do I have band now. I ran back to the union hall and got this band together, and we went on this job, a seven-piece band, and we got \$250.00 week. That was big money in those days. After coming out of there, I went back home and met a white guy booker that booked us on a trip through the west. David Helm was his name. He took us all through the west. I've been in every state in the union except two, Hawaii and Alaska. I've played every town. This band was during the silent picture days. We had a picture that we carried around with us called Suwanee River that we had to cue. Cue the pictures means that when the effects of the picture had a horse running fast, the drummer would play real fast. All movies then had a script they would give to the bandleader, or the conductor, and they had to cue these pictures. The drummer had a heck of time in those days because if [the actor] broke glass, the drummer had to break glass, and if [the actor] would shoot, the drummer would strike the drum, and all of that. We knew what was coming on next by the end of the trip, and we came back to Kansas City and the Lincoln Theater and played.

JT: How long were you on the road?

CL: Well, I was in a ballroom in Kansas City called the Elturion Ballroom. I was doing great, putting a large crowd in there seven days a week, *seven days a week*. It was a beautiful ballroom. There was two big ballrooms in Kansas City during that era, the Claymore Ballroom, and the Elturion. One night in November, we was arguing with the musicians union. They had a guy that ran the crystal ballroom over the dance floor that would spot the guys when they was going to a solo or an act. I got in an argument with the union that the band couldn't pay him. So, the union went on strike. I walked out. So, that night I came to the Elturion and there was only dancing there from nine until twelve. That night, we still hadn't gotten there until nine-thirty, so he came down to find out what was wrong, and we were all arguing with the president of the union named Joe Webber. I would have been a millionaire if it wasn't for him. He said, "Do you boys want to eat this

morning, or do you want to go hungry?" I was still the leader and arguing with the guys not to go, but I looked around and all my boys had left me alone in the office to go back to work without me. So I went and got in the car. I got a \$5,000.00 union fine and the guys got a thousand dollar fine. See, the guy didn't like me because he and my dad had a barber shop together, and they got in an argument so he didn't like me. So I left Kansas City in 1935 and went to Texas, Dallas. I met a guy down in Dallas called Abe Weinstein. His people had a bunch of liquor stores, and we opened up a club called "The 25 Club." That's where I put my band in Dallas, and we stayed there for about two years and Decca Record Company came through there interviewing people like you are. So, I signed to go with Decca Record Company, but in the meantime I got a letter from New York and a friend of mine named Orlando Robeson, who had been singing with a well-known band all over the country. He wanted a band he could front and so I agreed to go to New York and let him front my band for a year, and then after that I was supposed to record for Decca while I was in that area. We traveled all through the south and then got back to New York after I broke up the band in Lansing, Michigan because I had all the constipation and the others didn't have anything. I brought the band back to Dallas and then caught up with another band out of a little town, Tyler, the rose city of Texas. I took that band and got up with a booker and he was supposed to book me back East. I got as far Indianapolis, Indiana and got stranded with a bus (laughs). We were living in a rooming house.

I met a man in Indianapolis by the name of Denver Ferguson. He had a dance hall they called The Sunset Terrace. I got in with Denver and started booking bands out of his agency and I was doing real well too. I was booking bands and while in Indianapolis I met my wife Dorothy. She was home from the University of Michigan. She was just 19 and working at The Egyptian Club when I got going with her.

### **Darlings of Rhythm**



I got tired of sitting in that office in Indianapolis, and we had a band called The Sweethearts of Rhythm that we were booking. We couldn't get along with them. The leader in the band was singing at this club here, The Egyptian Club, where I knew [Dorothy]. This was a job the singer had that she got while she was in school down south in Alabama. We couldn't get along with her, so we began to look for a band of our own. So a girl in New York wrote us and told us she had a sixteen-piece all girl band that she would like for us to book and everything. But first, she wanted two thousand dollars (laughs). I told Denver, "You don't know that girl. I better get on a train and get up there myself." We didn't fly then. High class in those days was a bedroom on the train. So, I went up there and went into that big fine black hotel in New York, I can't think of the name now, but this is more important. The girl didn't have but six pieces. So, I took these six pieces back to Indianapolis. And in this ballroom we had rooms where they could stay. So, I sent them there and organized that band in Indianapolis, Indiana. In the meantime, Chauncey Holland was my agent. He's dead now. I organized another boy band and I was taking Helen Humes who was singing with Count Basie at that time. We was going to organize the band around her but the war came and started taking the men, and that's why I went to an all-girl band. In the meantime, I married Dorothy in 1942. She was twenty years old at the time. We organized the band and went on the road with the Darlings of Rhythm. We traveled all over the states. I've been in every state in the union except two, Alaska and Hawaii.

JT: Would you consider yourself part of the big band era?

CL: That's all I am. This is a big band (shows JT a picture), with twelve members. A big band had to have at least eleven members. Later on bands would add reeds and brass to have bigger sections. We took out the banjo because the banjo wouldn't blend with the horns and put in the guitar and string bass.

**Back to Tulsa, Oklahoma**

In 1946, I was in Florida and I got a letter from my mother saying that my dad was very sick. I called him in Miami and he said he was very sick. We was coming this way, so I took my band to some town where we was playing in the south, and my chauffeur and I... I say my chauffeur, see we had a bus that we slept in and a trailer with that. We had a stove in there. The driver was a white guy I hired. He was an ex-small race car driver. So anyway, I left the band down south and came back to Tulsa. I arrived in Tulsa January 11th, 1946.

JT: Where did you play during the war?

CL: During the war I played USO shows. I was under this command. We were on our way overseas. I went to New York for the interview and they say New Yorkers have seen everything. But when I pulled into front of the building in New York, they had never seen a bus like that before. I was on my way overseas but I had to come home on account of my dad. When I got here, he died one day before my birthday on the 25th of January. But I had a sister here. [My father] also had a lot of property here. It was a family deal and he took care of the property because he had more education than his brothers and sister. So, my sister was the administrator, but she died in childbirth in 1948, so I had to take care of my business here. I did business with my band and that's why I stayed here in Tulsa. My mother had gone blind and she died of cancer in '73. Being raised in Kansas City we stayed open all night up there, but in Tulsa we had what they called chicken shacks, which was a room where about ten could eat. They had tables and a record player and the steak was dry. So, I decided to open up my own nightclub. In October of 1948 I opened what we called the Clarence Love Lounge in Tulsa at 604 E. Archer. I made it a private club to keep the trash out because Greenwood and Archer was a rough neighborhood. That's where I met Lawanda Page, Lionel Hampton was a good friend of mine, and Woody Herman all used to jam there after hours. We went from eleven to eleven one time. It was the fist black and tan club in Tulsa.

JT: Did you serve liquor?

CL: No. That's where I made my mistake. I didn't want to get into trouble. Even Al Capone came to this club. I knew him. He gave me a big hat. That's been so long ago, I can't remember much. I know he gave me a hat. I had a lot of celebrities. I didn't allow the trash down here on Third Street to come in. You had to have a membership card. After running that from 1948 to 1953, I went downtown and they had a beer parlor here in the Mayo Hotel called the Tropical Lounge. I run that for a number of years. It closed in the 50s and I didn't have anything to do because the town was dry, the state was dry. They served it by the drink. I had to sell it by the pint or half a pint, which I made a lot of money on, but the state was dry. In 1959 when the state went wet, I had a liquor store down at Pine and Greenwood. I ran that for a year. I was among the first to have a liquor store. Before that though, when we lost our lease at the Mayo, I called a man named Page Belcher who was a congressman. I wrote him a letter and he gave me a job with the Tulsa Urban League. After that, I met my present boss, and I started this job here at the Pioneer Plaza in April of 1973.

JT: Earlier you mentioned a chicken shack. What exactly is that?

CL: Well, they didn't have any nightclubs over here on the north side of town. They had houses where the mistress would cook chicken, steaks, and set out soul whiskey. They had a vendor, what you would call a record player, a jukebox. In my club I had the first hundred-record player on this side of town. I had the second television ever come to town. We didn't have a station then. We got it from Oklahoma City. A black by the name of Wilson, who was a radio and television man, he had another one. The Bishops had one at the Bishop Cafe. The chicken shacks though were all over Tulsa. They had the Plantation, the Chicken Shack, Florence's Place right on Peoria. They were all in homes. They weren't even in buildings. But Florence did put a little three-piece band in hers, but the other places just had a jukebox.

JT: What was it like to be on the road in the 1930s?

CL: I had a bus in those days because it was tough on the black bands. We couldn't stay in the white hotels. We had very few towns, only towns like Atlanta, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City. But when we stayed in the smaller towns we had to stay in a rooming house. The lady would cook for us and we'd call her "mama," but don't let one of them catch you call her mama (laughs). You couldn't eat anywhere. There weren't black cafeterias. You had to eat in the Jim Crow compartment. When I would go into a town, I would send a valet into a cafe to get the menu because the restaurant would raise the prices when a band would come in. So, I'd send him to find a room and food and then he'd come back with the price so they wouldn't overcharge us.

JT: Tell me about when Billie Holliday worked for your band.

CL: She did at the Grand Terrace in Chicago. Billie was with me when I opened the Grand Terrace in Chicago. That was 1944, I think. At that time, the only reason I got into it with her is she wouldn't take her bows, all that kind of stuff. I lived under her apartment in New York and she'd be stomping on the floor upstairs. That was the last time I saw her.. As a singer, she was very nice. You couldn't beat her.

JT: What about Count Basie?

CL: Now, Basie came to Kansas City with a black road show, a company of about twenty five or thirty, and a band. They had dancing girls, singers, and everything. He came to Kansas City to the Lincoln Theater with Donzell White and the show got stranded there, so Basie stayed there. He was gigging around. I had a piano player, but Basie came over there and I hired him. I hate to say it, but Basie couldn't read well enough to stay in the band. So I had to let him go. Basie made his deal in a nightclub there in Kansas City, in a club I wouldn't go into, one of those *joints*. The guy who owned the club had the band on broadcasts, and Johnny Hamilton in New York happened to hear it when Basie played. It wasn't a full band when Basie played. He had played with a full band with Bennie Moten, but here he didn't have a full band, just about six musicians. Johnny Hamilton would take black bands and put them in white hotels in the dining rooms. He took Basie to the

Cracker Box in the William Penn Hotel in Cincinnati. Basie still has the same manager he's had since I saw him last. In those days, Joe Glaser handed all the blacks, like Ella Fitzgerald. I know when Ella Fitzgerald won the award at the Apollo Theatre there in New York she never looked back. So Basie got there and organized the band at the William Penn, and then took the band to New York and he hasn't stopped since.

Around that time I was playing in Oklahoma City at the Blossom Heap for sixteen weeks. I never could get in that garden there that burned down not very long ago, Spring Lake. See, in those days they had dance halls in amusement parks; Crystal City here, Spring Lake in Oklahoma City, the gardens in Denver.

JT: Tell me about Crystal City here in Tulsa.

CL: It was an amusement park with a dance hall in it. I guess it was built back in the 20s. The dance hall would hold about a thousand people. They would bring down a band led by George E. Lee. He had a purple Cadillac with a top down. He was flash, man. His nephew is up here now in a wheel-chair. His name is George E. Lee. Then, they started booking us from Kansas City down here. So, my band came down here and played in the summertime at the Falkinburg, and then in the winter time I would come down and play at The Loo, now known as the Cain's Ballroom. Most the bands they booked were out of Kansas City. No western bands played there. They say Johnnie Lee Wills started that. But I was playing there before Johnnie Lee was known.

JT: When did you first play Crystal City?

CL: I guess in about 1931.

JT: What was the largest prejudice you faced?

CL: The only time I got in an argument [was] down south. The first time was when I got to the ballroom a little late and the guy didn't want to pay me all my money. So I told him I was going to put him on the "Unfair List," and union bands wouldn't play for them. We were in Macon, Georgia and he called the sherriff over. The sherriff came in his sleeping gown and sleeping hat and told us if we niggers didn't get out of town he was going to put

us all in jail. But the very first time was when I was playing up in Clearview, Washington. We were on our way and they hadn't seen too many black folks. One of the guys came up there and asked if I would let one of my boys dance with his daughter. Then another lady wanted her daughter to dance with a black, and on and on. People started leaving the hall and we didn't know what was going on. They had a guard up there from down south. He told us to get back up on that bandstand, "Because where I come from we don't allow that." All of us carried guns. I had a German luger. There was six of us. I told Fletcher, a white trumpet player, "You better go on to the hotel." Everybody left the dance hall and we thought we were going to have to shoot our way out. We didn't have to and we got back to the hotel and put all our bullets out on the table. We always said if we got into trouble we were going down together. The next morning we thought we were going to get into trouble, but the people had gone out and gotten on that man from Texas for bothering us. That was the biggest one.

JT: Who are some of the other well-known people you've worked with?

CL: Well, in Texas I had the first black radio show in Dallas on KRLD. It was sponsored by the Schlitz Beer Company, the first all-colored radio review in Dallas.

JT: What about Lawanda Page?

CL: I put her to work in my club here when I brought her down from St. Louis.

JT: That's the lady from *Sanford and Son*

CL: Aunt Esther.

JT: Do you ever miss being on the road?

CL: I miss it now. I'm sure it's better now. It was tough then because of the accommodations, you know. But I'll tell you why I liked it. I never met friends I got close to. I didn't have to worry about getting too close to anyone. The only people that matter on the road are the people you are working with and your kin folks, because you don't stay in town long enough to get buddy-buddy, chummy-chummy. That's one thing I liked about it. Another thing was that you got to meet so many different people. Every club in

the country is different. The language is different. You know how they talk in the south, how they talk back east, how they talk in the west. They really talk bad down in the south; we say it's because of the air. Now my uncle, he was an old-timer and born here in Oklahoma; when he died there was a word that went with him that I bet ten people in the state know. When he said, "Where are you going?" he would say, "Where you gwine?" When he died, he was a bootlegger; he took it all with him. He was from Muskogee. My grandmother on my father's side was from the south; she was Choctaw on her mother's side who married a black man. My grandfather on my mother's side was Cherokee, and all my uncles on her side could pass for Indian or white.

JT: What would you tell a young person today who was trying to start a band?

CL: I got a band right now. They've never played with me, but they are called The Honeybees out of Tulsa. They are all in their twenties, just starting. They are getting more exposure now. When I used to book bands in Cincinnati, we used to have kids who would come up there and wanted to get a gig. For unsung groups it was really tough. But now people have more opportunities with cable and everything. Bob Hope is always looking for new bands to put on his shows. Of course now, record companies want people like Roy Clark and Charlie Pride. Everytime I watch TV I see Charlie Pride. That's one thing. I bet you never saw an all-black western band. Some things you never see, like a cow act in the circus. You never see a cow doing tricks in the circus. Them western boys are really making the money. Bands like that get booked all over the country, back west and all the way out to Hawaii. I tell you what they are doing now is making records in the United States and sending them over to Europe to have a hit in Europe. Just like, I thought those boys, what's their name, The Bengals?

JT: The Beatles?

CL: Yeah, look how many groups have come out of England since The Beatles, and going over big in America. It's all guitar crap. In my day and time, we had to dress alike and be dressed up. Now they come on stage looking like bums. Number two, the songs

they play are repetitious, "I love you, I love you, I love you." Every song we played like "Stardust" had a feeling and a melody. Certain songs today don't have nothing. Some western songs are the only ones that have anything left, I found out. Half of the new [bands] don't know music. They have long hair and all that crap. My bands had ties that were alike, white shirts, suits. I met some brothers in New York down on Broadway, and I would order twenty five or thirty suits for my band, at fifteen bucks a suit. Even the girls in the bands wore suits. I had a hell of a wardrobe, boy. If I had four shows a day, I had four different suits, but now they don't put on nothing and they are not even really musicians. They don't play music. In my boy band we had rehearsal, and each section had to rehearse individually. We would rehearse each section and then we would all go together. I don't see how kids can make it in this modern day. The only thing that's good for blacks in this modern day is that we can play professional sports, and everything like that, which makes it better. I had Satchel Page here when he played with the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the best teams in the country. We had our own little park. We had a black section and a white section of the stadium. Back then blacks had to crowd to the back of the bus and if the bus got crowded we were supposed to get up and give the seats to the white folks. The only blacks who were treated well were Ethel Waters, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington and people like that. We didn't have blacks in professional sports then, just performers, so that gave us more. One guy down in Georgia took us down and gave us a big party. I was out with Charlie Chaplain's wife; she and I would get out in Hollywood when I played there with the girl band. Another thing, we didn't drink or gamble. If we did gamble, we did amongst ourselves so if somebody lost I could give them a few bucks to hold them over. But if somebody from the outside came in and took our money, there we were. No dope, no pills. But we had a lot of fun.

JT: Anything else you'd like to add?

CL: I can tell you what I know about the Tulsa Race Riot. Now, it was told to me that the race riot in 1921 was caused by a black man kissing a white woman. At the time,



blacks and whites did not marry. That started it all and I wasn't here, but I can tell you where most of them are buried, over there on 11th Street in the west end of that white cemetery. 11th Street close to Peoria, the west end of it is where a lot of them are buried. I was just ten years old in Kansas City. The only way they took Greenwood was by dropping bombs. What they did was put all the blacks in a baseball park around here someplace. There was whites down there on the rooftops shooting at blacks. It was just one of those things where the white woman was mad at the black boy, who in those days would slip around. She knew she had the advantage, so that's what started it.

JT: Thank you very much Mr. Love.

APPENDIX B  
HUGH FOLEY INTERVIEW WITH  
CLAUDE WILLIAMS

## **Hugh Foley Interview with Claude "Fiddler" Williams**

Recorded 10 Oct. 1994, Kansas City, Missouri

CW = Claude Williams

HF = Hugh Foley

CW: My life is an open book. My name is Claude Gabriel Williams, but they put a nickname on me by calling me "Fiddler." So, I mostly sign my name Claude "Fiddler" Williams. I was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma in 1908, on February the 22nd, me and George Washington.

HF: I've read that your father came from the Carolinas. How did he wind up in Muskogee?

CW: That's a good question because I was born in Muskogee, but the rest of my family was born down in Carolina. So, I've heard them talk about it different times. My mother's mother and father came from Asheville, North Carolina. They was there [Oklahoma] while it was still a territory and I always heard my mother say if my grandfather hadn't been so tight and registered them, put them on the register, it just cost a dollar to put the name on the register [referring to the Indian allotments], they would have gotten the 160 acres or something that was given away while [Oklahoma] was a territory before it became a state in 1907.

HF: So they didn't register for what they could have gotten?

CW: They didn't register for my mother, you know. That was I don't know how long before I was born. They was there in time that if he'd paid that dollar he could have gotten all his kids on the roll, because of my mother. Mama had three or four sisters who moved out to California actually before I remember seeing any of them. I was pretty small, but I've seen them since and they practically all have died since. In fact, they all have died, but I don't know just how they got to Oklahoma other than I'm sure they was following mama's mother and father. My father and her mother and father came to

Muskogee. I don't know for what reason or what caused them to make up their mind to leave the Carolinas.

HF: Did they ever talk about Muskogee when they first got there or how it was during the territory days?

CW: We should have talked but I don't remember them telling none of that territory talk.

HF: Were they church-going folks?

CW: Yes. The funny part was my mother was a Baptist and my father was Methodist and they never did get together, you know. They died and she was a Baptist and he was a Methodist.

HF: Did you go to church with either one or both of them?

CW: At different times.

HF: Which churches were they?

CW: The Methodist was down on 7th Street in Muskogee and the Baptist was out on 24th Street. Let me see. You're going down 24th Street and pass that light where you can go up that hill and about a half mile farther. There was a church there on the right hand side. I can't tell you the name, but it was a Baptist.

HF: What was the difference in the music of the two?

CW: Well, it was a difference in the way they sing. My mother and the Baptists had a style of holding the notes; I can't really explain (sings musical examples). It was different in the swing, or something.

HF: Are those your earliest musical memories of Muskogee?

CW: Yes, I would say so. I was born down on Fourth Street right next to Antioch Church, but they moved out on 48th Street before I knew anything about it. I must have been a few years old but not old enough to even remember them moving out there. 48th Street was then the end of the city limits.

HF: I've read where there was a lot of music going on in your house.

CW: My brother-in-law that married my sister, he knew quite a bit about string instruments and he was real gifted himself. He could just pick up something and start playing it without any teaching. He used to sit up and pick up an old blues on the guitar [sings example] and when he'd lay it down I'd pick up that guitar and play at the same thing. He seen I was interested and so he went and bought a mandolin. He would pick the melody on the mandolin and then teach me the chords, the changes on the guitar up on the neck of the guitar. When he laid the mandolin down I would pick it up and play the same thing he was playing. I did all this by ear until, well, they needed a bass in the string band. My brother-in-law had a string band.

HF: Was this Ben Johnson?

CW: Yes.

HF: Was there a piano in the house?

CW: Yes. My oldest brother was a good piano player, but he played strictly by ear.

HF: What kind of music did he play?

CW: I was only about six or seven-years-old when he died. But I remember him sounding good. I know I wasn't over seven-years-old.

HF: What was the repertoire of the Ben Johnson string band?

CW: Oh, songs like "St. Louis Blues" would go back that far I believe. We didn't play much western stuff, old songs like "Wagoner" and "Red Wing." Those were some of the western songs. I just remember when my brother went into the service in 1918. I was playing pretty good fiddle then. But way before then, my cousin was playing a little fiddle and Joe Venuti came through there and played at an outdoors pavilion, outside, right at the city limits out there close to Honor Heights. Of course, we couldn't get close [because of segregation]. But you could hear that violin up on top of all the other instruments and it wasn't amplified either. He must have had a hell of a good fiddle. But I told my mother, "That's what I want to play." And at the time, we'd done bought a cello because we wanted a bass in the string band. See a cello is also a lead instrument, but we didn't realize

that until we got it, and after we got it they took the cello strings off and put on bass strings and I played bass. We used to go around playing barber shops and hotels and things.

HF: Which hotels?

CW: Stevens is the one I remember. There was one on the corner of Second and Okmulgee. I don't know how many different barber shops. They'd let us come in there and they'd pass the hat.

HF: Were there other black string bands or other black bands in town?

CW: Not in Muskogee, but different bands would come through town. I can't remember their names. We're talking about when I was ten or twelve years old. They used to come by and ask my mother if they could take me out of town. We'd go as far as over to Tulsa and other little towns around. We'd make eight or ten dollars or night. At that time, they was working all week for seven dollars, a dollar a day. We'd go to Okmulgee and other towns and do what we called "hustling." We used to call it "bustin'." We'd always be in a hotel or barber shop or something. I remember at one time we eased in some hotel. There was enough room for us to get inside the door before going upstairs. We started playing downstairs and people would throw money down to us.

HF: Where did they buy the instruments?

CW: Jenkins was a big store there with instruments in the window and everything.

HF: Were you in the band during your time at Manual Training High School?

CW: No.

HF: Do you remember anything about the band?

CW: Well, yes, but I left there about the tenth grade. I had a friend who went there and played with Boston Russell who had a brass band there at Manual, but I don't know how he got started or anything. I can't think of what kind of band they had there earlier when I first came over from elementary school, right across the street at Dunbar, to Manual Training. I can't remember what kind of band was happening over there.

HF: Did you have any violin lessons?

CW: Uh-huh.

HF: Who gave you the lessons?

CW: A fellow by the name of Mr. Neighbors. He was a black cat. He taught school at one of the grade schools. He knew the fundamentals, but he couldn't play fiddle himself, but he taught me how to hold it and what you're supposed to know and do with the fiddle. When I first started with him I could play pretty good, but I didn't know one note from the other. I took from him for a while and then I started from a white cat. Boy, he was real good. I could have played in a symphony or anything else if I would've stayed with him. I still remember some of the stuff he showed me, more so than the black cat. After I got where I could read an ordinary piano score, I'd buy a piano score and teach it to my brother-in-law. I don't remember Ben reading. I don't remember whether he did or not, but he could play a pretty good piano. If he could pick up a trumpet he could play it. Just whatever he picked up, he seemed to be able to play it.

HF: Do you remember any other styles of fiddle around Muskogee, like what's called Cherokee fiddle?

CW: The only other fiddle is Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. Bob played good fiddle and you had to love him, and Bob had another man, Leroy, I believe. Other than those two, there was a white cat that came from McAlester who could play the most beautiful blues. I don't know what his status was or what he knew about music, but he could play.

HF: Did you ever see Bob Wills?

CW: They was still in Tulsa when I joined T. Holder and the Twelve Clouds of Joy in about '27.

HF: Would you consider what Bob Wills did jazz?

CW: Well, it was their type of jazz back then. There are two or three different types of jazz, such as this progressive jazz they do when they play a song and never play none of the melody, just chords and things. If you aren't a musician and know what's happening

you're [lost]. My method is that whatever I'm playing everyone gets a little taste of the melody you know (Sings "Sweet Georgia Brown" with variations on the core melody). That's my type of jazz. That progressive jazz, I really don't dig it, but I know what's happening because of me being a musician. But if you aren't a musician that progressive jazz sounds like nothing.

HF: I've read you went south early on with a traveling road show. What's the story with that?

CW: This was 1925. This show came through Muskogee called T.O.B.A. at the theater right there on Second Street right next to the Elliot Building. Barney Kessel's mother and father had a shoe store right there on Second Street. I used to go down there in later years and Barney was playing around there with my brother-in-law and he'd give me his guitar. You know, I taught him this stuff on guitar. He won't say nothing about that because he done got to be one of the world's top jazz guitarists.

HF: What kind of stuff would you show him?

CW: Oh, chords and changes and that kind of stuff. I was living up here [Kansas City] and I was much ahead of what he was hearing and doing down there [because of] what we was doing up here. I was the number one guitarist in *Downbeat* in '36. About a month ago they brought my wife and I to Oklahoma City to give us Charlie Christian's award. Me and Charlie used to stand around on the corner in Oklahoma City, and man he was crazy.

HF: Did you play together?

CW: By me being with the Twelve Clouds of Joy, I had bought me a four-string steel guitar, one of those shiny things. I had it tuned up the same as a ukelele and we would do some jamming. What Charlie did in all his years of playing, he added two more strings, like a guitar E, B, G, D, and then A, E. Then he'd play Every Good Boy Does Fine (sings it) and he just added another A and E and I don't know what happened after that. That was about '27 down there on Second Street in Oklahoma City.



HF: Let's go back to that road show you joined up with.

CW: OK. This cat was named Kid Thomas and His Jazz Babies. He had about three girls dancing in a chorus line. We jumped from Muskogee to Hot Springs, and then from Hot Springs we played all up and down Arkansas, Little Rock, Baxter, and a bunch of little towns. Everybody gets a kick when I tell them I never did make a payday. Every time we'd get to a town, he'd go and make arrangements for a room and find a restaurant, and make arrangements for us to just go there and eat and sign our name and he'd take care of the bill. All the jobs he would take would be on a percentage basis, and he'd tell us he made just enough to pay the hotel and restaurant. When I left Muskogee I remember I didn't have but two pair of pants, but one pair was corduroy and I washed those pants so many times that by the time we got to Miami, Florida they was white, man. He'd give us the same line every time that he only made enough to cover the hotel and restaurant. We got to Miami, Florida, and my wife, who was traveling with me, got sick. I wrote mama and them and they sent two tickets for us. I took one of the tickets and cashed it in to buy her a couple of dresses since she didn't have nothing to wear either. So I sent her back home and said I'd be home soon because we were fixing to leave and go to West Palm Beach and then to New Orleans and I'd be closer then and could get home. That's what happened. Finally, we finished in New Orleans and he said, "I got to break the show down." When we were finished we didn't get no money. He managed to pay the restaurant and the room. So, I had to tell my mama to send me another ticket.

HF: So you went back to Muskogee.

CW: My brother-in-law still had a string band, but he had put together a little jazz band. I was going over to Okmulgee as well where the Pettifords were playing. The old man Pettiford was a horse doctor. The wife, Mrs. Pettiford, she taught them all music.

HF: What was the social environment of Muskogee like in 1925 and '26?

CW: It was a pretty good town when it came to business. There was big brickyard and a gin mill. A lot of farmers came in there. At one time the Katy [M, K, & T Railroad] came

in there, and the Midland Valley Railroad, and the Frisco. It had all of those coming into Muskogee at one time. My father was a blacksmith at 501 S. Third and right across the street was the Ridenour Livery Stable. My father got a lot of business from that and because the horses were always walking on the brick streets and wearing out their shoes.

HF: Once you left with T. Holder, would you come back and visit from time to time?

CW: I would come back and visit and play. That's when I saw Barney Kessel.

HF: How would you describe the racial situation in Muskogee both when you were growing up and when you would come back to visit?

CW: I guess there's different things you learn when you are growing up. I never did run into any problems. I believe on account of being a musician. Back in those days white and black wasn't playing in the same band. Benny Goodman broke that down. In Muskogee, we had our own pool halls down there. Second Street, boy, when I go down there I just feel like crying the way they messed up Second Street. We had pool halls, Fuller Restaurant and Hotel on Court Street and Second. Coming down Court Street and Second Street going north, all in there was businesses, pool halls and barber shops and everything. We had so much of our own stuff we didn't have to come into too much contact with the whites, other than the theaters and things was still segregated. Although we had our own theater, the Dreamland. I think the number of Indian people also had something to do with it.

HF: How so?

CW: The colors being close, you know. My color is close to being an Indian color. I have quite a bit of Indian in me. My grandfather could sit on his hair. He was all Indian.

HF: What tribe?

CW: Don't start me lying. All I know is they came from Carolina.

HF: Maybe Cherokee?

CW: Guess so. I never did figure that out. My grandmother was darker than me and had hair worse than mine (laughs), but my mother had good hair. She took from her father on

the Indian side and she had high cheekbones like the Indians. He was fullblood something but I don't know what. I remember his hair was real long.

HF: Did he ever sing songs or do anything musical?

CW: No.

HF: Your father's side then would be full African?

CW: Yes. He didn't have any Indian. My mother was my father's second wife. He had a family down in Carolina and had I don't how many kids when he quit and married mama.

HF: Back to Muskogee, why do you think so many top flight musicians came from Muskogee?

CW: Maybe it was all the good music teachers. It's a funny thing. I don't know how well Jay [McShann] knew Don Byas. I never did remember seeing Don around Muskogee. Of course, he was a little ahead of me. I don't know by how many years. He left Muskogee before I got to playing around with Ben. (Actually, Byas was born in 1912 and came up after Claude, which is why Claude did not know him.) He went on to be one of the world's best.

HF: Would you say that there's anything inparticular about the musicians who came from Muskogee that gives them a certain quality?

CW: After I got here in Kansas City, different cats would come up from down south and they seemed to be hip to different types of music. Like we'd play a song and the musicians here would know the right changes and were a little more advanced in music. The boys from down there was good musicians and everything but a little different. They'd come here and we, I say "we" because I showed Charlie Parker and taught him when he first came up here.

HF: When did you first run into him?

CW: Charlie was just a little kid with a sax under his arm. He'd come to our jam sessions and we'd try to show him right from wrong, different chords and things. Everytime you saw Charlie Parker he had his sax under his arm and an instruction book with him. He

could play that instruction book backwards he could read so fast, and that's what caused him to play the type of music he played. He'd come to one of our jam sessions and go [imitates a series of Charlie Parker riffs]. He didn't have his stuff together. If he didn't stop playing his horn, people would start leaving because he was so bad. But once he got himself together so he could go from one change to another, change from a B flat augmented and run into an E flat or an F seven running into a B flat, he knew his horn so well there wasn't no stopping him. But I knew two or three different boys he turned on and made dopeheads out of them, and of course they're gone too. Funny, he never did hit on me, but I would've hurt his feelings if he would've wanted to stick a needle in my arm. I turn my head when a doctor do it. We used to smoke pot together, you know. They'd go so far off into smoking pot, they'd run out of pot and they'd smoke nutmeg, just anything to get your head bad.

HF: Any final thoughts on the music of Muskogee?

CW: I really can't put my finger on why the musicians who come from down there are real good musicians. Most of them can read good because they taught that when Boston Russell had the band [at Manual Training]. He must have been a pretty good teacher because the different musicians who came from down there seemed to know their instrument and could play good. Most of them that come from there seem to become top musicians.

HF: Do you remember the Thomas brothers?

CW: Yes. We went to school together. We used to call Walter "Foots." He was with the Fletcher Henderson band. I don't know how he sent for Joe, but Walter was the oldest and he sent for Joe and put him through music school there in New York. In the later years, I was up in New York and I ran into Walter. Joe was the music director for one of the recording studios in New York. I knew them real well. I don't know how Walter got started.

HF: What can you tell me about T. Holder?

CW: T. Holder was another one. I don't know where he got his music teaching. You've heard of Alphonso Trent?

HF: Yes.

CW: Well, he was with Alphonso Trent when Alphonso was at the Adolphus hotel in Dallas back in '23 or '24. T. Holder was a beautiful trumpet player. He got his tone from shaking his head. It's really supposed to come from down here (motions to his diaphragm), but he got it from shaking his head. Torrence Holder.

HF: Not Terrence?

CW: Well, maybe so but I mostly heard it as Torrence.

HF: How about Hobart Banks?

CW: The girl that taught Hobart used to work at the Dreamland Theater. She played along with the silent movies. Her name was Georgia Green. She was hell of a piano player. To be able to play along with those silent movies you had to be able to read good, and fast too. A music teacher named Miss Clark taught her. Georgia used to pass my papa's shop down there on South Third going to Miss Clark's, down below my father's shop. Georgia took a liking to Hobart and I didn't spend so much time together [with them]. He had his own different style of playing of piano. He just had the gift, like Art Tatum. I used to play around with Art Tatum at his home in Toledo. In '32 I first played with Art out at one of the lakes in Toledo that had a walkway out on the lake to where the dance hall was. I liked seeing what he was doing and he liked playing with me. At that time Art would play "Tea for Two" on one hand and "Honeysuckle Rose" with the other (sings a musical example). Boy, it was the damndest thing I'd ever seen.

HF: What became of Hobart Banks?

CW: He died what I would call young. I had a chance to take Hobart to New York once. He'd seen John Hammond and John Hammond told me he was going to bring him to New York. Hobart had married then. His wife was a teacher and she wouldn't turn him loose. I don't know what happened to Hobart. He didn't live too long after that. I wasn't down

there that much when he was there, but when we would go down there we would do some jamming and he got to where he was just out of sight.

HF: What distinctions do you make between blues and jazz?

CW: Well, I would say it's practically the same. It's the way you attack the note and the way you turn the note alose. It's just a way...I should get my fiddle. Mind if I play you a little taste?

HF: Sure.

CW: *A recording of Claude Williams is featured on Track 3 of the compact disc attached to this manuscript.*

APPENDIX C  
OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY INTERVIEW  
WITH CLAUDE WILLIAMS

## Oklahoma Historical Society Interview with Claude Williams

Recorded 24 March, 1999, Kansas City, Missouri

RH = Rodger Harris, Oklahoma Historical Society

CW = Claude Williams

RH: Could we start with clearing up the confusion about your birthday?

CW: Alright. I moved my birthday up a little. I was in Flint, Michigan, and when the war broke out they was saying that everybody had to work or fight. So, I found me a job in the Chevrolet plant welding, but I had to have a birth certificate. I had moved my birthday up for school. I was actually born in 1908, but I moved my birthday up to 1906. My mother sent to Oklahoma City for a birth certificate [saying that] and so that's why my birth certificate says 1906. The birth certificate says 1906, instead of 1908, but I had been using 1908 because I knew it was 1908 since my mother had it in an old Bible there. My birth certificate actually got burned up in a hospital where my mother was, so I had to use 1906 that Oklahoma City had. I really haven't been using 1906 and I wouldn't even think of it, because 2-22-08 was really my birthday. But when I went in the Army I had to use 1906 because that's what the birth certificate said.

RH: What did your folks do for a living?

CW: My father was blacksmith in Muskogee. He was one of the first, not the only, but one of the few blacksmiths. My mother was just a homekeeper. She raised six kids. There was six of us, four boys and two girls.

CW: That's what he did, shod horses; and made wagon wheels from scratch, you know, putting spokes in the wheel on the hub, and putting the band on it. There was a livery stable right across the street, and that kept my father pretty busy. He made pretty good money shoeing those horses. In that livery stable they would rent out horses and wagons, buggies for riding, wagons for bringing stuff from the farm. It kept him pretty busy.

RH: And your mom's family name was?

CW: Russell. And my papa's name was Lee J. Williams.



RH: And they were living in Muskogee in the time of the Creek Indians possessing that land.

CW: Yeah, and I missed it by a year.

RH: Were they allottees?

CW: No. They should have, but my grandfather wouldn't enroll them because they would have to pay a dollar. He thought it was a graft at that time, so he wouldn't pay a dollar. There was my mother and two of her brothers, and I believe there was four girls including my mother, but I didn't get none because he wouldn't put them on the roll.

RH: Was your mom part Creek?

CW: No. My mother was from North Carolina, and my papa was from South Carolina, which was only about ten miles apart. He said he used to ride horses to see her on Sunday, somewhere between Greenville, South Carolina, and Asheville, North Carolina, right along in there. So, they were married, but I haven't heard about it in so long I've forgot whether they got married there or in Muskogee. But, my father and his brother who was named Gabe. They named me after him, Gabe Williams. So, they broke out from down there, but I don't know how they got to Muskogee. They was slaves down there and they ran off to Oklahoma. My mother had moved to Muskogee from down there. I think they got married there in Muskogee, but I'm not sure.

RH: What kind of music did you hear as a youngster?

CW: My brother-in-law knew quite about stringed instruments and he used to sit around the house and play blues on an old guitar (CW sings a blues melody). When he'd lay it down I'd pick it up and pick out some of the same stuff he was doing. So, he saw I was interested in music and he went and bought a mandolin. He would pick the melody on a mandolin, and show me the changes on a guitar from first positions. That's the way I started playing, when he'd put down that mandolin I'd pick it up. The first song I learned how to play on the fiddle was "You Got to See Your Mama Every Night, or You Won't See Your Mama at All."

RH: What kind of madolin were you playing, a flat back or one with a bowl?

CW: We had both. He had a bowl back and one with flat back.

RH: And the guitar?

CW: Just an ordinary cheap six string.

RH: But a flat top.

CW: Yes.

RH: Would you play the tune you were talking about for us?

CW: Yes. (Plays "You Got to See Your Mama Every Night or You Won't See Your Mama at All)

RH: Your brother-in-law, Ben Johnson, had a string band?

CW: Yes. My sister had a house right next door to ours. My father bought a three acre farm. It had an extra house on it and my brother-in-law fixed it up and lived there on my father's place.

RH: What was the string band like?

CW: Oh, we had a banjo, and a hell of a mandolin player, and bass. My brother-in-law was just one of those people who could pick up anything and play it. He could play a piano, and a trumpet.

RH: Was the banjo a tenor?

CW: No, it was just a regular banjo, but the mandolin had a banjo head. In later years I played a tenor banjo with T. Holder's 12 Clouds of Joy when he first started out.

RH: Where would you play with the your brother-in-law's band?

CW: Well, we would play in the barber shop, and in the hotels in the lobby. We'd go out to the edge of town where everybody is all eased up next to the house. We'd play outdoors there and make seven or eight dollars a piece when we split the money up, a night. Then, we'd go hustling. We'd get on a train and go to Tulsa and work over there. I bought my first long suit and I'd go to school with five or six dollars in quarters and give the kids money for them to buy candy and everything.

RH: How much would have a common laborer made in those days?

CW: A dollar a day.

RH: Where else did you play?

CW: We used to play dances on Saturday nights at what they call chock joints. You ever heard of Choctaw beer?

RH: Yes sir. Did you drink some of it?

CW: Yeah, I used to drink chock. You couldn't bottle it like you could beer because that chock would bust them bottles.

RH: You played for what they called jitney dances. What were those?

CW: (Laughs). That came from what they used to call "a dime a jitney." What would happen is the band would be sitting up there and a fellow would be down on the floor and there would be a gate with rope, and a great big place to dance. He would call out the dances, like, "Alright, we'll have a one step." And we had to have enough time to think and have a tune ready to play. People would start coming in and give him a ticket. There were making so much money that they gave away a brand new Ford every Friday night. He'd take that ticket and tear it in half and put half in a barrel. On Friday night he'd go down in that barrel and get a ticket and who ever had that number they would win a new Ford.

RH: Probably a T-Model.

CW: Probably so. That was about 1927, 28.

RH: Where did they have the dances?

CW: That was in Tulsa. They had one in Tulsa and one in Oklahoma City. We worked three months in one, then three months in the other.

RH: But you don't remember what location?

CW: In Tulsa it was the Louvre Ballroom. In Oklahoma City it was about a mile outside of town. They built a hall especially for that jitney dance.

RH: Were you playing with your brother-in-law as early as 1917?

CW: Well, when I first started with him I remember my brother went into the Army in 1918. And I remember playing with my brother-in-law down at the train station when they left, and we were playing, (sings) "How You Gonna Keep Them Down on the Farm after They've Seen Paris;" and "Over There."

RH: Do you remember some of the places music would've been heard in Muskogee?

CW: Well, that guitar player (Barney Kessel) born in Muskogee; his family had a shoe store right there on Second Street. Right across from where they lived was a dance hall upstairs on Second. There was two or three places where they had dances, one on Second, and later on one on Main, and further down on North Second there were different places.

RH: Who was the first great fiddler that you heard?

CW: Joe Venuti. I played a little fiddle when I heard that. He played about two miles outside of town. They had built a great big pavilion. Joe Venuti was playing there with a big band, but we couldn't even think of going to it. The closest we could get to it was about from here to your car (points out the window). I remember Joe Venute was playing in the upper register and he didn't have an amplifier and you could still hear him over the top. That's when I told my mama, "That's what I want to play." I played at the fiddle then.

RH: And you were outside by the fence?

CW: Yeah, we were about half a block from where he was playing. That was 1917-18, and people was real prejudiced. You couldn't go where the white people was.

RH: He must have really been playing loud.

CW: Yeah, a fiddle can be. This fiddle ain't quite as good as the one Joe Venuti had, but I can play this one loud. I got another in the back that is supposed a hundred years old, hand made by a fellow over in Kansas. But this one he wants five thousand dollars for. He just told me to play it and if I want to buy it, go ahead. But I got one that don't look that good. Do you have time for me to show it to you?

RH: Certainly.

CW: I took it to Washington [D.C.] and told them to give me an estimate on it. He said, "I'm pretty busy right now," and then took a look at it and he said, "Seventy-five, or a hundred." The name is in there but you can't see it to good. (Plays a blues scale on the older fiddle, then plays some on the newer one to compare the two instruments).

RH: How much of the violin did you pick up on your own?

CW: All of it. I could play better than the teacher when I took my first lesson. He started me back here. (Williams plays a basic scale).

RH: Did you practice scales on the mandolin?

CW: No, I didn't know nothing about that until I started studying the fiddle.

RH: When you played guitar, did you play a lot of full chords?

CW: Yes. Most of my chords were from four strings up. I learned how to play guitar mostly by myself, and my brother-in-law who started me out on C, you know, then G and D. I was the number one guitarist in New York in 1936. That was *Downbeat* when I was with Count Basie.

RH: What kind of guitar were you playing?

CW: An arch top, I believe it was a Martin. This thing would cut right through. I didn't need no amplifier.

RH: What did they want to hear out of the guitar in the string bands?

CW: Well, the chords were most important unless you were doing a solo, because that's what the band needed, chords, mostly accompanying with Count (Basie). Count could play real good with both hands because Fats Waller taught him how to play. Before Count died he got to where he wasn't playing but with one hand. He was just laying down the changes with his left hand. He got to where he wasn't doing nothing with his left hand. When I joined him in '36 he was awful good. I just played chords, but then I was pretty advanced on the chords using push chords, the majors, sevenths, augmented, diminished, that kind of stuff. When John Hammond took over the band he didn't want anybody in the

band to outshine Count. Every time I would take a solo or two I would get a big round of applause, so that was another reason [Hammond] got rid of my ass (laughs).

RH: How many people left the band when you did?

CW: Five. It took Count a long time to get the band back in the shape that it was, because he let a couple of good trumpet players go.

RH: In the early days in the string band, you didn't have any sheet music?

CW: Oh no.

RH: When did you first start using sheet music?

CW: Well, we was using some charts when we played in the jitney dance there in Tulsa. Our first job when we left Tulsa was here (Kansas City) at the Million Dollar Ballroom. We jumped from Tulsa to here, and we got pulled out of the union here because they didn't want no coloreds playing in that ballroom. We played for a few months, but after that we couldn't play there. The Tulsa union said before we left there we had played a "miscellaneous engagement," which is a job where you don't go through the union. That was a damn lie, because we were working for Walt Falkingburg through the jitterbug thing. What he had done was rent the hall out to somebody and they had a big party and we were playing on the same job, but he rented out the hall and we happened to be there, so they said we played a "miscellaneous engagement." But the big bands didn't have nothing for me to read. They could have, but they didn't. They might have had a melody line or a chord line, but I didn't see no music for drums. The only drummers who could read were the white drummers. Duke had two of the best drummers ever and I know they couldn't read.

RH: When did you first hear the term jazz?

CW: That's a good question. Dixieland was around. They were playing some stuff there that was way above what the writers come up with today.

RH: Did you go out on any theater circuits.

CW: Yes. I left Muskogee with a group (Kid Thomas and His Jazz Babies) on the TOBA, you ever hear of that?

RH: Theater owners, something...

CW: (Laughs) Yes, but we called it Tough On Black Asses. That's what I left Muskogee with. I played fiddle in the band.

RH: Tell me about the original Clouds of Joy.

CW: That was led by Torrence Holder. They called him T. Holder and His Twelve Clouds of Joy. Torrence's son messed up with the payroll, got in some trouble with the money, and Torrence's wife had a big beauty parlor in Dallas. So, his son had messed around in Dallas and didn't get back with the payroll. So, on Saturday night, Andy Kirk, Fats, Slim, there were three or four families depending on that money and they were real disgusted. Then, I started out making fifty dollars a week, and that was damn near a month's salary for a common laborer. That was 1927.

RH: When Andy Kirk took over the band, did it change any?

CW: No. We just got together when they didn't have no payroll and just put it together. Andy was the most settled one. He didn't gamble and didn't do no drinking. He sent for his wife from Denver to come join.

RH: Would you consider them a territory band?

CW: Yes, they were one of them.

RH: How would you define a territory band?

CW: You'd play here (Kansas City) tonight, then Oklahoma City tomorrow night, then in the Texas the next night, Arkansas, then back up.

RH: How did you travel?

CW: By cars mostly. I remember John Williams used to buy a brand new Chevy every year. I used to do most of the driving. It seemed like I could stay awake later. We jumped from Memphis, Tennessee up to New York City and the Roseland Ballroom in 1930. After we played here in Kansas City, we stayed on to get ourselves together for the

next happening and we got booked on the battle of the bands. Bennie Moten was on that bill because he was the best band then, and George E. Lee had a band then. (See Clarence Love interview in Appendix A for more on George E. Lee). We didn't have but a little band compared to Bennie Moten. One band would play three or four sets, then the next band would come and play three or four sets, and then there would be time for an intermission. Then, last set we played against Count (in Bennie Moten's Orchestra) and we had Duke (Ellington). Duke kicked ass, it was pitiful. But they wasn't in no shape to be messing with Duke. He had his own arrangements all together. We started out with "Tea for Two," or whatever, and we'd all take a chorus then all play the chorus on the way out.

RH: You played with Nat King Cole?

CW: Eddie Cole got a band together up in Chicago with Nat. Nat was the best piano player in Chicago then, but he didn't know he could sing. Eddie was the oldest. Both of them were playing in a joint on 58th Street in Chicago. Eddie had all the best musicians in Chicago, and he must been up on something because they were trying to get out of Chicago. We played one dance in Chicago and took a bus right after that was waiting for us in back of the hall. We had on these white coats, and we all got on the bus and went to Paducah, Kentucky. We must have got there at five or six o'clock in the morning. Later on, here come Eddie walking down to the bus saying, "Oh man, bad luck. I don't know how I did it, but I left without my bookings. But that ain't too much trouble, I'll book a couple of dances and take care of our expenses and then next week we'll have clear sailing when my bookings catch up." So, I took him over to the side and said, "Look, I've been rehearsing with you all while you all was working, so if I'm going to stay here you are going to have to pay me." He said, "Well, I don't know if I can do it. I can't guarantee it." He was supposed to pay us fifty dollars a week. So I said, "Well, I'll see you." I turned around and went right on back to Chicago. The next day, or the next day after, Count came up looking for me to bring me back to Kansas City. That's when we enlarged the



band right there. All the rest of the fellows coming through, Buck Clayton from California, Lester Young who had joined the Blue Devils in Oklahoma City who wasn't making no money then. So, all we had to do was ask for him. Big (Walter) Page had just come up and joined Bennie Moten and the Blue Devils just busted up. We got them together and I went right along with them while they was enlarging the band. But Nat got down South so far he couldn't get back, so he started a trio, and that's how he got started.

RH: You got to hear some of the great jazz people of all time. Would Louis Armstrong be at the top of the list?

CW: Shit yeah. There will never be another Louis. I played with Wynton Marsalis out in Hollywood for three or four days, but all of them come under Louis. He was the first man I ever heard play a diminished chord. (Williams plays examples of augmented, seventh, and diminished chords, then plays "Cherokee" and explains different chords within "Cherokee").

RH: Were most of the songs in the old days based on the blues?

CW: Yes, because there weren't too many people back in them days playing the chords. They had a style of playing but they didn't play chords, that's why they picked me because I could play all that (plays Duke Ellington's "Things Ain't What They Used to Be").

RH: What I hear in your playing is the attack of a horn player.

CW: Ain't that a bitch? That's what the *New York Times* said, that I play like a horn. I was just trying to be heard, until I got the amplifying system.

RH: When was the first time you used a public address system, or amplification?

CW: I guess it was in the 30s, although I remember the first recording I did with Andy Kirk in '28 or '29 in Chicago. We recorded our first record there. I'll never forget the trumpet player, Harry Austin, a good trumpet player from a little town south of Tulsa. He came up and played with our band and he could read anything, but he couldn't think of anything to play. So, Mary Lou Williams and Andy Kirk would get me to play a solo so

he could copy it. I'd moved it down to C from B Flat so the trumpet player wouldn't have to transpose it.

RH: That first record you made in Chicago with Andy Kirk involved what kind of mechanics?

CW: Well, they used those big wax discs to record the music on. We were recording a tune by the name of "Snag It." (Williams plays a sample of it). We messed up at least a half a dozen of those pieces of wax because Jim kept messing up the intro to it (sings examples of the intro). But I think he got good enough to get it through some kind of way because we went on and recorded it.

RH: Do you remember the label that record was on?

CW: I think it was '28 when we recorded it in Chicago.

RH: Would you consider that a race record?

CW: No, not exactly because it was one of Louis Armstrong's records. "Snag It" is a hell of a tune.

RH: Would you play us a couple of tunes, whatever you like, but I would love to hear "Over the Rainbow."

CW: (Plays "Over the Rainbow")

RH: What could you play from your Clouds of Joy days?

CW: I believe we played "Honeysuckle Rose" back in those days. (Plays "Honeysuckle Rose," a tune whose name he has forgotten, and one called "Ow.")

RH: When did they start calling you "Fiddler?"

CW: I guess when I first came to Kansas City with the Clouds of Joy.

RH: Why did Muskogee produce so many good musicians?

CW: Damned if I know, really. We had a lady piano player who taught a bunch of people, but a lot of horn players came out of there too.

RH: If you had to list four or five musicians you really admired through your career who would they be?

CW: Ben Webster, we played together for awhile. He passed over in Copenhagen. He's got to be one of the noted tenor players in the United States. I never did play with Louis Armstrong, but I was an acquaintance with him. We'd be around each other when we were playing in the same town. I was in Chicago when he was there. Don Byas was a hell of a saxophone player from Muskogee. I already mentioned T. Holder.

APPENDIX D

HUGH FOLEY INTERVIEW WITH JAY McSHANN

## **Hugh Foley Interview with Jay McShann**

Recorded 9 Oct. 1994, Kansas City, Missouri

JM = Jay McShann

HF = Hugh Foley

JM: My name is Jay McShann. When I was coming up they called me J.C. McShann (laughs). "J" stood for James. We was trying to think of a name for the "C" because they called me J.C. so long. Finally, the old man said, "Well, we'll call him Columbus." And I hated that (laughs).

HF: The books list a variety of birthdates for you. Which one is right?

JM: January 12, 1916. Muskogee, Oklahoma.

HF: How did your folks come to Muskogee?

JM: My dad was from Texas. His name was Jess McShann. Right out of Dallas there. What did they call it? I think it was Ratliff, Texas. Right out of Dallas, about 20 miles east of Dallas. My mother's name was Leona. She was originally from Alabama and then they came to Oklahoma. Her maiden name was McBee.

HF: Your mother's parents came to Oklahoma?

JM: Yeah. They came to Oklahoma from Alabama I think. Most of her people were in and around Chickasha and over in that part of Oklahoma, Chickasha and Lawton. My Dad came up from Texas. They had a farm out there east of Dallas.

HF: What brought your Father to Muskogee?

JM: Well, I think what brought my Dad to Muskogee was that he had a uncle. His Dad's brother was living in Muskogee. You know how families do. They want to change towns, kids want to change towns. So that was a good excuse for him to go to Oklahoma 'cause he knew he had a uncle there. I did the same thing. I had a uncle in Tulsa. That's why I went to Tulsa. I'm sure that's how he got there. I don't how my mother's mother came to Muskogee, but I heard them talk about what a mistake she made for not signing up for those hundred and sixty acres. You know when they was giving it away. I think

she missed it by a day or so. All you had to do was go down and sign. I know that had to be going back a pretty good ways, a pretty good distance. She lived there in Muskogee. I used to go down and see her. You know how you do when you go down and see the grandfolks (laughs heartily).

HF: Did she tell you any stories of territory days?

JM: No, she didn't tell me anything like that, but I heard my mother talk about it, how [my grandmother] had missed out on the land.

HF: Were your grandparents musical?

JM: Well, no. The only ones I ever heard was that she had two or three little old songs she would sing like Army songs. You know, she'd sing World War I songs. My mother used to play around on the piano, church songs.

HF: Anything in particular?

JM: You know how you get them hymn books. Baptist hymn books I guess. I used to listen. We had to go to church a lot, Central Baptist. You know how when you're a kid coming up you get tired of church, so tired, so sick and saying, "Let me hurry up and get out of here," you know. In my dad's case, he always liked good singing and when I was small he would take me to these choir singing contests in small towns.

HF: Which ones?

JM: You could put Rentiesville in there, but most them was on the other side [of Muskogee] like Redbird, Coweta, Tallahassee, all them little towns.

HF: What were the contests like?

JM: Choirs, you know church groups. They'd sing church songs. They would have singing conventions, where one group would come from one town, another group from another town. There might be fifteen or twenty towns that would all get together and the old man always enjoyed that. He'd take me and I liked to listen because you heard all kind of singing. Like sometimes you'd be sitting on a bench with an old guy that sang bass and he could sing those low notes so low that it would almost shake the seat you're sitting on,

you know they had them pews. I remember that. His voice would be so strong it would shake the pew (laughs heartily).

HF: Were these indoors or outdoors?

JM: Oh, they'd be in churches.

HF: What was the music like that went with the singing, just a piano or what?

JM: Some had pianos and some didn't. Just like the holiness church. They didn't have pianos but they had guitars and tambourines.

HF: Did you go to some of the holiness churches?

JM: Yes, I used to go to the holiness church with my grandmother. The holiness church there in Muskogee. I enjoyed going to the holiness church because they played music in there. They got in the groove, you know (laughs). They put the show on the road and I used to enjoy it. I never will forget. I was doing some one nighters one time and we stopped in a town called Waycross, Georgia. We didn't have to work this particular night. We had this night off, but we was going to play the next night. So, I started up the street to find something to eat, and man I heard one of the toughest rhythm sections I ever heard in my life. Two or three guitars and a tambourine and they had a beat! I was pretty young then but you know you recognize that stuff just like nothing was a stranger or stange to you. You know when I heard that I kept following it around until I found out where it was. I kept following and following it and wound up at a church and I walked in this church and they had all that sawdust on the floor. But those cats was swingin'. That rhythm was just perfect.

HF: Where was the holiness church you went to in Muskogee?

JM: I don't remember the name of it but it was on 8th and Kalamazoo.

HF: I've read where your father taught you a tune early on.

JM: Yeah, one tune. It was a decoration day and my mother had gone to some kind of meeting and took the girls with her and I was just there at the house with old man. So, he

was fooling around on the piano and I was telling him to teach me that, and so he did. I did never know the name of it. It was just something he did on the piano.

HF: When did you notice the difference between music that was for church and music that wasn't for church?

JM: Well, my father worked for a furniture company called Ferguson Brothers there in Muskogee. We had what they used to call a Victrola, where you had the horn coming out of it, you know, and a little box and you had to wind it up and then put the record on there and then it would cut loose. So, sometimes they would throw away records and things at the furniture store and so he would just bring them home. I remember I picked up a record and it was either Bessie Smith or Mamie Smith. James P. Johnson was backing her up on the blues and I put that record on and I really enjoyed it because the blues was, you know, "It rained five days and the clouds turned dark that night/And you knee from that there was trouble in the lowlands that night/It thundered and it lightninged and the winds began to blow/And some poor folks didn't have no place to go." Then she'd moan a little bit about it, you know, (moans), making like she was so sad she couldn't sing no more. I enjoyed that and the playing that was backing her up. I knew then that I liked that. I finished high school in '33. Earl Hines used to broadcast from the Grand Terrace in Chicago. What I would do is that I would find out when he was going to broadcast and then I'd tell my folks that I was going to stay up late and get my lessons done. Everybody else would go to be and they'd say, "Boy, that boy sure is studying." And I'd keep the lights burning and I'd look at the watch and it'd be about eleven o'clock, or 11:05, and Earl Hines would come on and I would turn the radio on and this guy would be hollerin', "Father Hines, Father Hines, Father Hines! Coming to you from the Grand Terrace at 39th and State," or whatever street that was. And he'd be hitting the piano keys (sings and imitates Hines' playing). I thought that was one of the greatest things I had ever heard. It was so descriptive. It made it exciting the way they announced it. So, the folks thought I was studying, but I was staying up so I could hear him (laughs).



HF: In Nathan Pearson's Goin' to Kansas City, you talk about the bands that came through Muskogee like Bennie Moten and Clarence Love. Would you describe the scene when those bands came to town?

JM: Well, when the bands would come into town it was something. Eveybody that could would try to get to the dance. That's just like bringing a new culture to you, and everybody wants to see what they're doing. They wanted to hear the music that they played so everybody could know what's going on. But, my folks were such strict Christians, they wouldn't let me go to the dances. I couldn't go to the dances. The only way I could get to the dance when the band would come into town. I'd made me some extra money and I'd tell them, "I'm just going to the show or somewhere." Then I'd go down and catch the band, but I never did let them know (laughs).

HF: What was a band's usual set up in those days?

JM: Usually, the reeds were set up in front, saxophones, altos, tenors, like that, clarinet with that. That would all be on the front line. And then the next line, if you got a trombone, would be the trombones. And then the last line, the third line, would be the trumpets. Then, to the right of all of this band [stage left] you'd find the drums, the bass, either down in front of the drums or to the left of the drums. And the guitar and piano down here on the [stage] right of the band.

HF: Was the guitar amplified at that point?

JM: No, they didn't have amplified guitar then.

HF: What was the audience like? Was it mixed?

JM: Well, sometimes they used to have mixed crowds there in Muskogee. As a rule though, Muskogee was always a town bands came through, and they came through quite a bit. So, it had to be something special to get a mixed crowd of say 50/50. Of course, some of the places I played like the Winter Garden, they didn't want blacks in there, you know. They didn't want any blacks or Indians in the Winter Garden, because that was supposed to be where *they* had *their* dances.

HF: Did seeing the bands that came through Muskogee make you want to be a musician?

JM: I had never even given that a thought. It shows you how things will do, will work out, you know. It worked out that later on, there was a family band that came through town, and they needed a piano player. They were playing different jobs like Haskell, Oklahoma, and Hominy, Oklahoma; that was an Indian town. Shawnee, Wewoka, Okmulgee, those were dance towns, and Wagoner. I played dances in Wagoner. So, I'd make these jobs with them, you know. They used to call it Professor Gray's band. His kids was the ones doing the playing. He had one boy played drums, another boy played trumpet, and another boy played sax. The girl was playing piano, but she couldn't travel all the time and that's the reason they used me a lot.

HF: Were they based in Muskogee?

JM: No, they were living in Haskell. I'd go over there sometimes and play a breakfast dance on Thanksgiving or Christmas at five o'clock in the morning, five to nine. Then play an evening dance that night maybe from nine to twelve.

HF: What kind of songs did you play in this group?

JM: Whatever they played. I didn't know what I was doing, I was just trying to follow. It was just, "Do whatever you thought sounded good" (laughs). A lot of times I remember the guy that taught band in school. His name was Kyle Collins. Now, he was from Texas, but he came up there and got a job teaching at the high school, Manual Training. I remember he took me on a gig with him. And I didn't know nothing. I thought you just played and played, and keep playing. So, he turned around to me and says, "Complement the blues. Complement the blues." I didn't know what he was talking about. I thought he wanted me to play the blues a compliment, you know, "Blues I like you," or something. I didn't know what he was talking about, but when he starts doing his hands like this (ripples the fingers on his right hand), then I realized what he meant.

HF: What was his instrument?

JM: He played trumpet. He put together the school kids in a group. They might have a social or something if they had a game coming up in Tulsa. So we might have a social after the game and there wasn't anybody to play but us (laughs). We'd just do whatever he would tell us to do. Quite naturally, out of the whole group it might be he and maybe the drummer, or maybe he and one or two other guys who knew more about anything than any of the rest of us. That's what made good bandleaders. Back in the days you could take guys who couldn't play nothing, but you give them a horn and let these guys take over [the band] for two or three days, and these guys would have them *playing*. T. Holder from Muskogee could do that.

HF: I've read that T. Holder was a good band leader.

JM: He was a great band leader because the band would break up [when] a guy has to leave town, or a couple of guys talking about they're going to leave the band. You know sometimes you get cliques in the band. [They say], "We'll break the band up." So they'd all leave and they'd talk these other guys into leaving. So when they'd all leave, and this and that and the other, T. Holder didn't think nothing about nothing. He'd say, "I ain't worried. I'll have a band." He'd tell a guy, "Yeah, I'll have a band there Saturday night." T. would get these guys together, call them all in there, and say, "Now look here. You hold that note and you hold this note. You do this and you do this and you do this. And they all do that and they get a sound [sings note in high register], "Booooooo." Well, then when you see the guys get a sound, and they never had any idea they could get a sound like that. And it perks them up, and it's easier for him to teach them then. When he shows them how easy it is and says, "See how easy you did that? Well, come on now, we're going to do four of these different notes [sings four notes]. And when they do that these guys say, "Oh man, this guy has got me playing?"

HF: Did he operate out of Muskogee?

JM: He operated out of a lot of different places, Texas, Tulsa, Oklahoma City. But he was originally from Muskogee. (Holder was not born in Muskogee). He lived a long life.

He would call Claude [Williams, born 1908] boy. He'd say, "Ah, boy, this is a young boy here." You take guys like that, like Old Man Gray. They called him Professor Gray. He could take musicians and he could get them together, which is how he had that family band. I enjoyed the family band, but I never thought I'd be playing music and stay with it. I remember after I finished high school it was dull in Muskogee. So, I figured I might as well do something. So, I got a letter from one of the Gray boys and he said, "Man, if you're not working or doing nothing, come on over to Tulsa. We're playing under the club here called Club La Jo Ann." He was telling me to come over and he'd get me a job with somebody. So, sure enough, I did go to Tulsa and I got a job with a guy named Bernie who had a twelve-piece band. Sure enough, I got there and I got a gig with the band. They needed a piano player. So, I made my first gig there with them. We played at a place out there called Turley. They had a big dance hall out there. You know those guys thought I was reading music. I couldn't read no music. They had all this orchestration set up in front of me on the piano. And I'm sitting there looking I'm reading, and wasn't reading nothing (laughs). I was just listening to them and going on with them.

HF: You mentioned some groups would come to Manual Training and play at assemblies. Do you remember any specific groups?

JM: Well, now Clarence Love would come through there. What he would do is if Clarence Love was going to play a dance there on, say, Friday night, he'd come by the school and probably advertised in town, you know, "Dance at the Grand Ballroom, nine until twelve, music by Clarence Love, direct from Kansas City." So, Clarence would come in there, because he knew he was going to get some school kids to come to the dance. We'd have an assembly at about 3:30 before school was out. He'd get up and play about three or four tunes and announce, "We're going to have a dance tonight at the Grand Ballroom." Some of those kids had folks that would give them money and they'd go to the dances. I played a few early gigs with Clarence Love when I came up. I never did play with Ernie Fields.

HF: Tell me about meeting and playing with Don Byas.

JM: Well, how I met Don Byas. See, there was a lawyer in town who played tenor sax, Lawyer Kimble. He was a black guy. He'd get together with Don Byas, and another guy named Weaver. These saxophone players would get together with Ellis Ezell. Ezell was coming on with Don Byas and that's how I met Don Byas. Because when they would get that group together they would come get me to play piano, but I couldn't. I don't why he'd come get me because I never saw nothing I was doing. They had to have somebody I guess. They'd say, "We got to have somebody, so, come on, you got to play" [laughs]. They used to get together and get me. I was pretty young then.

HF: Did you play out with them?

JM: Don and I made a gig in Wagoner. I don't know who all was on that gig. We played the Winter Garden one night, and then left there and played at Wagoner for a breakfast dance. Then we played an afternoon dance back in Muskogee, and then played a night dance out at Stem's Beach at Honor Heights. They had a ballroom out there and we played there.

HF: Did you know Aaron Bell?

JM: Yeah, Aaron played with a lot of the greats. He played with Basie, he played with Duke, and Andy Kirk. He's teaching a lot in upstate New York now. His mother used to teach music there in Muskogee, and his dad played trombone. She used to play at the church I used to go to, Central Baptist. Sometimes he'd bring his trombone down and played along. She gave my sister lessons, and another lady named Mrs. Warren also gave my sister lessons.

HF: Did you ever go to Taft?

JM: Yeah, we used to go to Taft. That's an all black town. We used to just call it a stop in the road [laughs]. We used to go out there and play. There was another place we used to play, out there at the school. They thought because we were from Muskogee we were

musicians. You know who you need to talk to is Ellis Ezell. He remembers more than I do about Muskogee.

*At this point in the interview, Jay McShann calls Ellis Ezell, in whose band Barney Kessel played, and invited him over.*

HF: Mr. Ezell, do I have your permission to record this for educational purposes?

EE: Yes.

HF: Jay tells me you grew up in Tahlequah.

EE: Yes, that's the capitol of the Cherokee Nation Indian tribe. In fact my mother was a freedman. She was on the rolls as a Cherokee freedman. They used to call the people who lived in the [Indian] territory the "natives." In fact I've heard from the tribe every now and then, with some money that they had given to the Cherokee freemen, just a few cents. She was a Cherokee freedman.

JM: Was she a Cherokee?

EE: No, see the Indians had slaves, and they intermarried with their slaves. I often wonder how my family came to Muskogee, before statehood in 1907. My mother was a native, but my father might have been from Mississippi. I wonder how they got there. I know the Indians had slaves and I know they brought the slaves from the South. (To Jay) You're parents were from Texas weren't they? Was your mother a native?

JM: No she was from Alabama and my dad was from Texas.

EE: They had Creek natives and they had Cherokee. Some of the Blacks could speak the Creek and Cherokee language.

JM: Yeah, they could speak it.

EE: Way back in the years.

HF: Did you grow up in Muskogee?

EE: Yes, but I was born Tahlequah. We migrated to Muskogee in the early 20s, and I stayed there.

HF: When were you born?

EE: August 4th, 1913. I left there in 1948 and moved to the West Coast. Prior to that I did three years in World War II. Prior to that I always lived Muskogee.

HF: Mr. McShann told me you played for years there with the lawyer he had played with.

JM: You played with Kimble didn't you.

EE: Yes, Kimble, and Don was in that band.

HF: Don Byas.

EE: Yes, Don Byas. He was a little bitty guy, but all that big tone. His dad was a clarinet player. His family was mostly educators, teachers.

JM: Now, you remember Edwin Weaver?

EE: Yes, they were first cousins.

JM: And they both played alto and tenor?

EE: Weaver played mostly alto. He got his PhD and went into education, but I think he's dead now.

JM: I used to see him when I played in Montgomery. He was teaching at the college there in Montgomery.

HF: Was Don Byas in the school bands?

EE: He went to Langston, but he played with the band at Manual Training. He finished high school about 1931 and he went to Langston and played there. Eventually, he was with Basie and went overseas and never came back. I think he was in Brussels when he died.

HF: Critics are very favorable to his playing.

EE: He is very inventive, and he has such a fat tone for such a little guy. Wooo.

JM: He could play.

EE: If you could go to New York and play with anyone you were doing alright.

HF: And he did.

EE: Yes.

HF: What were your musical beginnings in Muskogee?

EE: We had several piano players, and several musicians, and a high school band. Several guys formed a jazz band from the high school band, Manual Training High School.

HF: And you did that?

EE: Yes.

JM: You remember the band y'all had that had John Maddox in it?

EE: That's the picture I got.

JM: Part of that come out of the high school didn't it?

EE: Yes, part of it. That was about 1932. I was still in high school. I finished in '32. Some of the guys, especially the Perry boys because one was going to Manual Training, the trumpet player.

JM: The other one was in Oklahoma City wasn't he.

EE: Well, that's where they were from. Their dad was Reverend Perry and he was the president of the big Baptist convention. And E.W. and his brother came their to play with the band. His brother played alto and he played trumpet, and a pretty nice arranger too.

HF: Where did you play in Muskogee?

EE: Lots of places. We played out at a place on Okmulgee called the Roosevelt Inn. Count Basie played there, and Chick Webb played there. We had a regular gig during the war, we played there for the soldiers because Camp Gruber was there. I have forgotten the name of the hall. I know it was on Broadway and Main upstairs. It would be full of soldiers. Barney Kessel played with us in Muskogee and that was kind of a rarity for a caucasian to be sitting in with Black men.

HF: What made him fit in?

EE: Well, he was good! He's a good guitar player. We called the band the Rhythm Kings. You know who started that band, Thadeus Hickerson.

JM: Is he the one that started that band?

EE: Yes.

JM: He was a relativee to Juanita Hickerson?



EE: Yes, Juanita.

JM: Well, I'll be damned (laughs heartily). What ever happened to them?

EE: Thad had a little problem with misappropriating the money, so they pulled him out of the band. He died in Los Angeles.

HF: What years would those have been when Barney was in the band.

EE: Well, that would have been during the war, '42 or '43. His mother ran a second hand store on South Second right next to the fire station. I think they lived up in the top of the building. This was the early 40s, when he was playing with us.

HF: What kind of material did you play?

EE: Mostly stock arrangements.

JM: (laughs) Yeah, I remember those stocks.

EE: E.W. used to make arrangements for the band, but mostly we played the stock arrangements.

JM: Yeah, that was something new when he come in there writing wasn't it?

EE: Yes. No one really wrote then. Sometimes, you would embellish, put something of yours into the stock arrangement, instead of what was on the music.

JM: Yeah, put something into it. We used to always tear those stocks apart.

EE: I knew all the musicians in Muskogee but the ones who played with Cab Calloway. There were before my time.

HF: The Thomas Brothers? (Joe and Walter "Foots" Thomas)

EE: Yeah, the Thomas boys. They were before my time. I didn't know them.

JM: I remember people would say, "Well, there's two guys out of Muskogee with Cab's band." Foots Thomas and Joe (laughs).

EE: Of course, I came up with T. Holder.

JM: Did you ever play with T?

EE: Oh yeah. T wasn't much for playing, but he had a good ear and he could remember a tune.

JM: He had a good ear.

EE: That's all.

HF: What do you remember about the bands coming through Muskogee in the 1920s?

EE: Louis Armstrong played, but he didn't play for blacks. He played for whites at some building. We climbed up on top of another building where we could look in the window so we could hear him playing. The place was packed because Louis Armstrong was playing there. We used to get a lot of bands coming through there at the Convention Hall, which was a big building between Second and Main. You could walk in and walk all the way back. They had a dance floor in there.

JM: They had two dance halls in there.

EE: That's right. They had a small one and a big one. They tore it down. It's been gone quite a spell. Most of the bands in the late 20s were from Kansas City. The same bands that Count Basie formed his bands with.

JM: Tommy Douglas.

EE: Yes, Tommy Douglas. Tommy had a band in Muskogee for a long time. He had a band in Muskogee when I came out of the Army and that was '46.

JM: He had a band in Muskogee?

EE: Yes.

JM: Well, I'll be dogged (laughs). Old Tommy could put those bands together, couldn't he?

EE: Yeah, he could, and he hired me for the band. He was such a wonderful musician.

JM: He could blow too.

EE: He never got the credit. Pioneer. Pioneer.

JM: Yeah, Bird and everybody would put their horn away and sit and listen when Tommy Douglas would sit down to blow. That was right here in Kansas City. How did he get missed?

EE: I don't know.

JM: Well, he did go and play with Duke (Ellington) for awhile.

EE: One of the other things I remember about Muskogee is that we had seven or eight lawyers and doctors, so there was some money there in the 20s. Who was the woman singer from Fort Gibson?

HF: Lee Wiley.

EE: That's right. I didn't know her, but I read about her in Leonard Feather's book. You know, the paper didn't give Leonard Feather much when he died. I saw one little thing like that (holds thumb and forefinger a few inches apart).

JM: They sure didn't give him much did they.

EE: No, and he was very important figure in jazz, very important.

HF: What do you think should not be overlooked in a study of why Muskogee produced so many jazz musicians?

EE: The only thing I can say is that there were just so many outstanding musicians, half a dozen, that came out of Muskogee. I don't know why.

HF: Do you think the schools had something to do with it.

EE: Yes, we had some good band directors.

JM: I always thought they had a pretty good school system there.

EE: I know they had a good school system. Just think about the people you were with and where they wound up. There was Claude Williams, but he was before my time. In fact, Claude used to come back to Muskogee. He would come home a while and he would come and sit in with the band I was playing in. Sometimes for three or four days, and sometimes for a month, and then he would come back to Kansas City. He certainly carries his age. He's 86 and looks younger than that.

HF: Would you say there is any one thing that distinguishes musicians from Muskogee?

EE: I think they are part of a larger tradition. There's nothing unique about what was going on in Muskogee.

HF: Would you say you had access to all the culture that other people had access to around the rest of the country.

EE: Yes, we used to listen to Basie when he was broadcasting from the Reno Club in Kansas City. It used to be at ten or eleven o'clock at night.

HF: Is there anything you would add about Muskogee you haven't talked about it?

EE: I think the schools and the band directors had a lot to do with it.

HF: Any final thoughts, Mr. McShann?

JM: I think that's about every think I can think of. I'm just about thought out (laughs).

APPENDIX E  
OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY INTERVIEW  
WITH JAY McSHANN

## Oklahoma Historical Society Interview with Jay McShann

Recorded 24 March, 1999 Kansas City, Missouri

RH = Rodger Harris, Oklahoma Historical Society

JM = Jay McShann

RH: What musicians impressed you when you were growing up in Muskogee?

JM: Well, there was a lot of musicians that impressed me, and a lot of them were from Muskogee. I thought as a kid I liked [Louis Armstrong's] playing and singing. But, as I grew older I didn't, until one night we were listening to some records at a party. And I heard this record two or three times over and I asked somebody to play it one more time. I just had to hear it again. They played it over a fourth and fifth time and I said, "Who is that?" They said it's Louis Armstrong and I went over and looked at the record and it was. I realized then that it was me. I didn't know I liked him as much as I did. I realized Louis was a tough man. I also liked the Mills Brothers. They used to broadcast all the time. I always had a lot of respect for Ellington. I had respect for Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. They used to do that noon broadcast for Pillsbury. My mother would be sitting there everyday at noon listening to them. She'd be patting her foot and I'd be watching her foot. And the thing about him was that he was really popular in Oklahoma. I hear different people talk about him and say when he had a contract to play somewhere he didn't worry about the money because he knew people was going to be there. People would come from everywhere to hear Bob Wills.

RH: Do you consider him a jazz or swing musician?

JM: He was swinging. Yeah, Bob Wills was swinging. When I saw my mother patting his foot I knew he was swinging then.

RH: Did you take piano lessons?

JM: No. I used to go with my sister to her piano lessons. She used to have so much trouble with some of the pieces the piano teacher had given her. So, I was trying to help her and tell her what to do. The piano teacher would go back to her kitchen and say,

"Check that back over while I go check on my beans. So, I told my sister to move over and I'd play it for her. The teacher would come running out of the kitchen and say, "That's what I've been trying to get you to do." When she got out there I was still sitting on the piano stool. She'd ask my sister if she played that and my sister would say, "No that was my brother." Then she [the teacher] said, "Well that's what I've been trying to get you to do. You're brother showed you that?" My sister said, "Yes." And the teacher said, "Well, tell your mother to never send him back with you to take your lesson because he's getting a lesson for free and he's going to have to start paying." My mother didn't want to pay more so she said I had to stay home and I couldn't go any more.

RH: What kind of piano did you have at home?

JM: We had a Kendall. Those were pretty good pianos in those days. You know how it is with those uprights. When you get a good upright, they last. They hold that sound.

RH: You went to school in Muskogee?

JM: Manual Training High School.

RH: Was there any music education there?

JM: Well, they had Mrs. Clark. She used to be over most of the black schools. She did a good job because she used to come around and get all the kids singing. Even then, I used to look forward to her coming around and livening things up.

RH: Were there musical groups in high school?

JM: Well, no more than what the music teacher would teach. They would bring in different terms. In the early part of school there wasn't much. What I'm talking about is after the sixth or seventh grade. They used to let the kids loose and have a little fun when they'd play football against Tulsa. They even used to have a song about beating Tulsa, (sings) "Tulsa ain't winning no more, lawd, lawd. Tulsa ain't winning no more" laughs. You know, it was a swinging little thing. They used to go out swinging and strutting their stuff, but that don't happen no more.

RH: What was the first professional band you saw?

JM: I think the first professional band I saw was Clarence Love. They would play songs that were popular. Some of the songs were swinging and some weren't. You knew what you liked. You know it's funny. You can always tell what a person likes, whether they want to admit it or not. I've seen people talk about groups and say, "Oh, I never did care too much for them." But then you watch that person and you see them patting their foot and say, "Hey, wait a minute, I thought that guy said he didn't care for this." But, there he is, over there having a ball. He felt it, you see, but maybe he wasn't aware he felt it. A lot of times you're not aware that it's there, the beat's carrying on, and everything's going on real beautiful. You're not aware it's going on, it's just natural. Like when I first started playing music, I like to look around to see if people are patting their foot or making some kind of movement. Usually, if people are enjoying themselves they give it away some kind of way.

RH: What were some of the places you could go see music in Muskogee?

JM: Well, there weren't a lot of places I could go because my parents were so strict. I knew better to even mention it. I could hear a band at a parade or the fair. They'd have two shows, a white show and a black show. I'd go hear those bands.

RH: Did you work in high school?

JM: No, very little. They brought a band teacher in there who liked jazz. So, he would get me and take me on gigs sometimes. Maybe around Christmas and Thanksgiving, they would have dances and he'd call my folks and say he was going to use me. Since he was the band teacher the folks thought that would be alright. He was trying to get my folks to get me a horn anyway. He thought I could be a great horn player. But at that time, I was just fooling around on the piano. He started to take me on gigs. I remember the first gig he took me on. You know when the other horns are playing the piano is supposed to comp. I didn't know what I was doing. I guess he heard me running all up and down the piano and he said, "Comp, comp." I said, "What." And he said, "Complement the blues." And I said does he want me to go over and compliment who ever is playing the blues?



Then he started moving his hands like this, which is what I started to do, and he said, "Yeah, yeah." He said, "Piano players comp while the others are playing." So, not knowing nothing about it, you keep your ears open and try and get every little piece you could get of something you didn't know anything about.

RH: What other instruments besides the piano were there?

JM: Well, he would carry two saxes, one tenor and one alto, then we had a bass, and drums. Actually, the piano, bass, and drum was the rhythm section. (McShann goes on to describe rhythmically how the band was put together, using musical examples). I remember one old guy named Lester Sheffield, he was a piano player and he liked playing that Sousaphone with different groups. He'd have the Sousaphone all wrapped around his head, and he would sit up there and play those three notes [gives example]. I enjoyed him so much. I got such a big kick out of that. Now, that was before they started using the bass fiddle. They was using bass fiddles, but it was sort of a new thing. Then, the fiddle ran out the Sousaphones and bass horns. Everybody wanted to hear that fiddle, you know.

RH: When you first started playing for money, do you remember one of the jobs you had?

JM: One job I remember was with Don Byas, he was from Muskogee. He was older than I was (Byas was born in 1912), I'd say around three or four years older. He had played with different groups around Muskogee, with the older guys, guys like John Maddox and Funk Wiley, and those guys. And then, he had a job one Fourth of July. The job was the night before the Fourth of July from nine to one, then the early morning of the Fourth we had another job at about three or four in the morning, for a breakfast dance, from three to seven or four to eight. Then, we played another date at noon in another town called Wagoner. We had three dates right there together. I didn't know what they were doing, I just went to go play. So, the next morning my folks woke up and I hadn't gotten home, and so they started calling Don folks [and saying], "Where are the boys? What happened to them?" Don's folks said, "We don't know. Don left here yesterday and he's not here."

My folks said, "He left yesterday and he hasn't shown up either." My mother was telling my Dad to "go find that boy." My Dad was so sick and tired of hearing her screaming and yelling. So, I didn't show up until around two o'clock in the afternoon, and they was all waiting their to kill me. My mother was saying, "Boy, you wait until your daddy gets here." I didn't say nothing. My old man come in and I thought here it comes. They all started talking at the same time and raising the devil with me. We done got paid for all three jobs, so I just started pulling dollars out. I took my time, and I just kept pulling dollars out and from here and over here [pointing to his pockets]. After a while they was hollering and carrying on and raising cane with me, and then came to a shut, because I kept pulling dollars out. I was pulling out of my shirt pockets and back here (McShann motions toward his pockets). So, the old man says, "Say, boy. You gotta work tonight?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Hey, you girls get in here and fix the boy some food, and fix his bed up and put him to bed. And wake him up at... What time do you got to wake up son?" And I said, "Well, we gotta be there at eight o'clock." And he said, "Wake this boy up at seven o'clock so he can be dressed when they come pick him up." So, everything just changed. I'd never seen no change like that in my whole life up until then. I thought, I have to keep this [music] going. It takes a whole lot of weight off of me." It was beautiful. But you see they was still hard on me, you know what I mean.

They'd say, "We don't want you playing over there, at this place or that place." Some people would come out who used to have things out in the country towns. They'd say, "We hear your boy plays piano. We are going to have picnic out there at such and such a day. We sure would like for him to come out there and play for us. We'll pay him."

Well, you know how those staunch Christians are supposed to be. [My folks] would say, "Well, we're very particular about this boy and we don't want him out there getting the wrong ideas," and so on, and so on. I'd just get sick of listening to that, you know, but I had to go by the rules. So, if they could jive the folks well enough, the folks would say,

"Alright, we'll trust him with you." I always had to tell people to ask my folks because they was kind of funny about me playing.

RH: How much money do you think you made at those gigs?

JM: Maybe a dollar or a dollar and a half a night. I remember some lawyer had a party one night, and he wanted me to play for the party. The thing was that I was working at a filling station at that time for about four dollars a week, 11 or 12 hours a day and fifteen hours on Saturday. This lawyer brought me out to play for this party, and after I got through he said, "How much I owe you?" I didn't know what to charge him. The only thing I can say is, "Whatever you'll give me." So, he gave me a five dollar bill. I said, now wait a minute, I'm making four dollars for working all week at the filling station and I just made five dollars in one night. I better start learning some more songs (laughs). You get to thinking, you know, and I said I need to learn some more songs so that if something comes along I'll be better prepared to play. You learn little by little. I started trying to learn a few things.

RH: By the time you got out of high school, were the territorial bands still circulating?

JM: Oh, yes. There were bands coming in and out of town all the time and it's a shame I didn't catch more of them, but my folks didn't have much money no way. They were poor and they couldn't dream of paying money for me to go see a band. So, I didn't push them because I knew I'd catch bands at other times, catch them rehearsing and go there and stand around and listen and look. The first time I went to Tulsa after high school, the way kids want to do something after high school, there was a family band that used to come get me to play with them, and they had written me from Tulsa and they said, "Man, we're going to try and get this guy to hire you. He's got somebody that's been playing here at this club, but he's been here awhile. But we're going to get him out and get you in here." They wasn't too successful getting that done, so they wrote me and said, "Just come to Tulsa." So I told the old man that I thought I was going to go Tulsa and work over there, and he said, "What are going to do." And I says, "Anything I can do, even if I have to

wash dishes." He said, "Well, ok. Let me know if you get short and I'll send for you." That sounded pretty good to me. I went to Tulsa and run into these guys The Grey Brothers Band, the family band. The old man used to play trumpet and he had a daughter that played piano. He had a boy that played drums in the family, and he had a trumpet player and a saxophone player in the family. I think the daughter who played piano was getting ready to get married, so I used to play a few gigs with them. I tried to get a job doing just anything, but there was no jobs there, I mean no jobs. Things was rough.

RH: What year was that?

JM: That was 1933. That was mean. So, I'd get up and go looking for jobs every morning for two or three weeks. I'm getting tired to death of it, there's nothing happening at all. So, I was on my way back to my uncle's, I was staying with my uncle there in Tulsa, and I heard music, a band playing. So, I just followed the sound and they were down on Greenwood Avenue rehearsing. So, when I got down to the bottom of the steps I could tell it was upstairs. I was wondering, "I ain't got no business going up in there. I wonder if I should go up there." I see people coming in and out you know, so I though I'll do it. So, I walked in like everybody else, and I was sitting around listening to the band rehearse, and I heard one of the musicians say, "Man, we got to have a piano player for this Saturday night." So, I knew I couldn't read no music, so I thought I better sit and listen to them rehearse and then tell them I'm a piano player. After they finished rehearsing, I went up to one of the saxophone players and said, "Look, man. You all still need a piano player?" He said, "Yeah, man. How come you didn't say nothing before now. We just quit rehearsing." I said, "I didn't want to interrupt you while you were rehearsing, but I think I can make it if you still need a piano player." So, the guy said, "Hey Denny," Al Denny had the band then, "I think we got a piano player here." So, Al said, "Well, pull out the orchestrations and we'll just rehearse him." And that hit it just right because I had done heard these orchestrations. And they played them and put all those orchestrations up there, and I'm sitting there looking like I'm really reading music

and I don't know a note, nothing. They said, "Man, it looks we got a guy here who can read." And another said, "Well, we better see if he knows how to fake." We are going to play such and such thing and we want you to take off one it. So they played whatever it was and said, "You got it, you got it." So I played plink, plink, plink...plink, plink, plink. And they said, "Man, we got a cat who can read AND fake" (laughs). I guess they was satisfied so I got a job with Al Denny's band. He had about a fourteen-piece band. We played Friday and Saturday night, and sometimes he would go out of town on Sunday night. He would give me \$4.50 for Friday night and \$4.50 on Saturday night. When we went out of town I always made three or four dollars. I thought, "This is it." I'd give my money to my aunt to hold for me. I played with Denny around there until some fellas came in from south Kansas and they was looking for some musicians to play in their clubs. The Gray Brothers went up there and played another club. We were up there in Arkansas City, around Winfield and that southern part of Kansas. You know how it was in them days, those guys were operating illegally. They were selling bonded whiskey and stuff like that. They were operating illegally because Kansas was dry. So, we worked them clubs like that and a club would close up when the sheriff got mad and we'd have to think of what to do next. I said, "I don't want to go back to Tulsa." So, musicians would ask each other where they were going now that the club is closed. One cat said, "Well, I'm going back to Oklahoma City." Another said, "I'm going back to Tulsa." Well, I didn't want to go back to Tulsa, and I sure didn't want to go back to Muskogee because it was deader than Tulsa or Oklahoma City. There was nothing happening in Muskogee. I had an uncle in Omaha and so I thought I'd go up there and see what was happening. So, that's what I did. But on the way to Omaha I got stopped in Kansas City for a couple of hours layover. So, I asked this one guy, "Where is the Reno Club?" He said, "Just a couple of blocks over. I can show you from here. So he showed me." So, I got up there and saw come guys I knew from different bands in Tulsa and Muskogee, and I got in there and they said, "Hey, that's McShann. When did you get into town?" I said, "I'm on my way to Omaha.

They knocked the joint off where I was playing down there in Kansas, closed the club, so I thought I would go up there and see what was happening." They said, "Man, you don't need to go anywhere else than right here in Kansas City. You need to stay here." So, I told a guy I didn't have enough money to stay, and the guy said, "Here's the key to my place. You take my room and I'll stay at my girlfriend's house." That kept me in Kansas City and that was really the beginning. I figured I was on the road then. So, sure enough, I did. I took his keys and stayed in his room. He said, "I'll bet you have gig in the next two or three days." A couple of days later, there was this guy who said, "Who is this new musician in town? I want to see this new musician." He was a drummer named Hop who used to get a lot of gigs around Kansas City here. A lot of the promoters and club owners knew him. They'd call and ask for this or that and Hop would take care of them, and Hop took me on my first job here in Kansas City. That was the beginning.

RH: How many hours would you play at night?

JM: Well, I'll tell you how they was doing it then. Some of those guys was going to work at eight in the evening and working until four in the morning. And some of the guys was going in at eight and working until six. Those were the kind of hours they had. But the neighborhood club where I went to work with Hop was from nine to one. That was first place I ever worked in Kansas City, the Monroe Inn, a neighborhood club. At one o'clock we were through so that gave me a chance to check out all the other clubs. I'd get off at one and I would go to a different club every night. Then, I got a chance to listen to different music, and different cats, and different sounds. I was just out there playing the best I could. I remember working in Tulsa and I was suppose to be playing behind some singer. The singer told me to just play the parts of the song that I did know loud, and the parts of the song that I didn't know to just barely touch the keys so they won't sound because he'd be singing. That way I don't have to hear them bad notes. You do a whole of lot of things that you never dreamed happening when you start to make music. The best old singers would use those megaphones. Of course, I heard Jimmy Rushing and he

used to use that megaphone. He had one way out here like that (spreads arms). He did a song that said, "When the leaves bids the tree goodbye."

That was the first thing I heard Rush do. I always like the twang in his voice (imitates it by singing).

RH: When was the first time you heard boogie-woogie played?

JM: Well, I was in Kansas City and there was a whole lot of boogie woogie and blues players. Old Pete Johnson, he was the boss. He could play that stuff.

RH: Did that interest you right off?

JM: Well, you are interested in a lot of different stuff. You do get interested in it because I wanted to play able to play boogie-woogie in case somebody asked me to play it. So I need to get in shape for it. I'd get off early down there at Monroe's and go listen to the boogie-woogie players, then go by and listen to the jazz players, and then go by and catch the blues players. Consequently, I wound up with jazz and blues. I listened to bands like Basie, and even Ellington's band. Ellington always played the blues but he had the blues disguised. He played the blues but he didn't call it blues. He used a blues format, but when he got through playing it, people thought they heard a top-notch concert. He put a big name on, but they were hearing the blues. I sat here going through some of Duke's music. I do that sometimes, you know. I said, "Old Duke played the blues. A lot of people would say he played all symphonic stuff, he doesn't play the blues. I'll play that stuff sometime and know Ellington was playing the blues all the time and winking an eye at the people.

RH: I know you've told the story before, but would you repeat how Charlie Parker got his nickname?

JM: Oh yeah, well we used to play a lot school parties, fraternities, sororities, and that kind of stuff. We played at Kansas University, Nebraska University, the schools in Iowa. We were on our way to play up in Lincoln at the university. We had to drive automobiles because we didn't have no bus or nothing. We'd have three or four guys in one car, three

or four guys in another car, and three or four guys in another car, you know. As you're driving along the country roads, you remember how the farmer's chickens would be running out toward the cars? So, the car Bird [Charlie Parker] was riding in, one of the chickens ran out there too far and got hit. Bird looked back and said, "Hey man, you just hit that yard bird. Let's back up and get that yard bird, ain't no use in leaving him there." So, the guy backs up and Charlie Parker gets out and picks up that yard bird and puts it in the car. When we got to Lincoln, he went over to a lady name Josie. We couldn't stay in hotels you know. We had to stay in private homes. So, he walked in there and told Miss Josie, "We killed this yard bird on the way up here, could you fix it for me?" And she said, "Yeah, I'll be glad to." So, she fixed it for him and Bird wouldn't let anybody have any of that yard bird (laughs heartily). He said, "If I hadn't picked this yard bird up there wouldn't be no yard bird, so ain't none of you going to get any of it" (laughs again). That's when we started calling him Yard Bird.

RH: Now, how did you get your nickname? (Hootie)

JM: Well, when I first came to Kansas City, the weather was kind of warm and so I went around to different clubs all the time. Guys would say, "Hey, are you going to play with us tonight." I'd say, "Yeah, I'll sit in and jam." So, the guys would wink at the bartender and say, "Hey bartender, fix this old boy up here. He just got in here from down in Oklahoma somewhere. Fix him up one of them specials." Well, you remember back when they used to have 3.2 beer? Well, the bartender would just put a thimble of alcohol in the glass and then pour that cold beer on top of it, and that alcohol made it taste sweet and made it taste good. I didn't drink beer because I didn't like it. But that alcohol made the beer taste good and so I said, "Man, this is some good beer. Where did it come from? Give me another one bartender." So, they asked if I wanted another one, and I said yes, so they fixed me another one, and then they asked me to play and I couldn't get out my chair. So, they started calling me Hootie. They'd talk about me to other musicians and say, "Yeah, Hootie was down there the other night." They'd say, "Hootie?" [They'd] say,



"Yeah, you know that guy that came down to the club the other night and got hootied. That bartender fixed him a couple, three of those drinks and he couldn't get up out of his chair to play the piano." So, they started calling me Hootie and it stuck right until today.

RH: When did you make your first recording?

JM: It was 1940. See, we had been to Chicago to make that session, but I didn't have any knowledge of taking care of business. I thought we would just go into Chicago and call the man, and he would tell us where to go record and that was it. But, when we got to the studio the union was there, and they said, "Who in the hell do you think you are? What in the hell do you think you are going to record. You ain't going to record shit." You know how those unions used to be, and that guy just came out there raising hell. I asked him what he thought I should do. He said, "You get your ass back to Kansas City, blah, blah, blah. And don't you ever come in here to Chicago as long as I'm around here, walk in here without a contract, and not depositing the contract down at my union, and then come up here and record in my territory." I just didn't know all the ins and outs of the business, so we couldn't record on that trip. I talked to Dave Kaplan and he said, "I'm going to California and then I'm going to make a stop in Dallas, Texas. So, why don't we make a date to get together and record in Dallas. Contact me. I'll send all the things into the union for you so you won't have to worry about nothing. Just get down to Dallas." So, he took care of the business and that's actually where we did our first recording, in Dallas. That was 1940.

RH: What was the studio like?

JM: Well, they had that sound absorbing stuff up on the walls and they put one microphone up in front of the whole big band (laughs). One little mike in front of a whole big band. We thought it sounded good. We got a hit out of it, a few hits, "Confessin' the Blues," "Hootie Blues," "Vine Street Boogie." We were just lucky. That's what it was, luck. Of course, now they have twenty four mikes up there and they got to go through all of this. Back then, they had one mike for the band, and if they had a singer, the singer got

one mike, and the band got the other. We would do some things, like we would move the reeds a little closer to the mike than the brass, and then move the brass so when the brass got ready to shout, they could shout right into it.

RH: What happened during World War II?

JM: Well, we started losing all the good musicians to the Army. The Army had all of them. The next thing I know they got me, and they was mad at me because, you see, I always wanted to take my examination either in New York or California. So, they missed me in New York, and then I went to the West Coast and they missed me on the West Coast. So, when I was going back to New York, I stopped in Kansas City and they knew where I was. And that night, boom, they pulled me off the stand and then I had to do the Army thing. That broke up the band, because that same night I told one guy to take the music home, don't worry about the uniforms, just take the music. So, he decided he would wait and get the music the next day, but when he came back the music was gone.

RH: So, they took you to Leavenworth?

JM: Yeah, they said, "You are in the Army," and showed me the papers. All we have to do is take you up there and we are going to take you in the next fifteen minutes. You need to find someone to take your place, so I had to do all of that. I told the manager, "Now you take the book [the music] home with you because they are going to take me to Leavenworth, so you take the book." He came down the next morning and the book was gone.

RH: What happened next?

JM: Well, I was in the Army. They sent me to Georgia and I got down to Georgia and my papers hadn't even gotten there. They started me to soldiering, walking and all that. My feet were just as flat as they could be, and when an officer would come up and look at my feet, he would say, "How did yo get in this man's Army?" I said, "Well, that's the way it is." He said, "They didn't have no business putting you in the Army." So, quite naturally I started working real hard to get out of the Army. I had only been in the Army

fourteen days and they realized they didn't need me so they said they were going to muster me out with some guys that had something wrong with them. So, they put me in that bunch and after about six or eight months they put me out of the service, but I didn't have no book. So, I had to start from scratch again. See, I was lucky the way I got my book together. These guys came through with the walkathon and they said, "We're going to need a thirteen or fourteen piece band for this walkathon." So, I said, "I'll get me an arranger and I'll get him to write the music for the whole thing and then I'll put it together. So, I rehearsed the reeds one part of the night, and the brass the other part of the night, and I took them down there where the rhythm section had been playing, you know drums, bass, and piano, and put the band together. When we got them all together the brass was shouting, the reeds were sounding good, and see the walkathon lasted for about four-and-a-half or five months, and when it was over I got to keep the book. Then, the book had about five hundred tunes in it, and about two hundred head arrangements, so that's how I got back out there.

*Jay McShann Plays several tunes on his personal piano, as Track 4 on the compact disc attached to this manuscript.*

RH: How much did going back to school and getting a formal education in music change you?

JM: Well, not much, because I was set in my ways. After you are set in your ways, you are not going to change much. What I found out was what I was doing. I didn't know what I was doing all this time. Well, you find out.

RH: What do you like to play today, besides the old familiar things.

JM: Well, you do things you think people will like. People want to be entertained, so if you have to play to 1,500 people, you have to think about what the whole crowd would like best, something I can bring the crowd together with.

RH: Would you play some boogie-woogie you remember?

*Jay McShann plays a boogie-woogie tune to end the interview.*

APPENDIX F  
HUGH FOLEY INTERVIEW  
WITH AARON BELL

## **Hugh Foley Interview with Aaron Bell**

Recorded 12 March, 2000, by telephone to Bell in Mount Vernon, New York

HF = Hugh Foley

AB = Aaron Bell

HF = What were your parents' names and what are their origins?

AB = My mother was from New Orleans. Her name was Birdelle Beatrice Johnson. My father, James Aaron Bell, his roots were in Tennessee. I don't know if he was born in Oklahoma or not, but my mother met him in Oklahoma.

HF = Do you know why they chose to come to Muskogee?

AB = No, I have no idea. Actually, I think my daddy's dad was a Cherokee Indian, that's why he would be in Oklahoma I guess.

HF = Your mother was a piano teacher?

AB = Yes. She taught piano and she taught singing. She was the choir director of the National Baptist Convention.

HF = Did she pick up her musical training in Muskogee or New Orleans?

AB = I think she picked it up in New Orleans. That where she was trained but I don't know what school.

HF = How old was she when she came to Muskogee?

AB = That I don't know either (laughs). I never inquired. I know her mother was a Creole, and her mother was French, and her [mother's] husband was Spanish-Moroccan. They met up in New Orleans. That's why I went back to New Orleans to Xavier University to do my undergrad work. I got my Bachelor's degree at Xavier.

HF = You mentioned that your father had some Cherokee blood, and your mother worked with the Southern Baptist Convention, do you think there is any connection between the Creek or Cherokee hymn singing and the African hymn singing?

AB = There could be, because in those days the Indians and the Blacks mixed quite a bit. In fact, they say that 84% of Blacks have some Indian in them. I'm sure that some kind of way that happened, but I don't know how. I couldn't give you any exact documentation.

HF = You don't know of anyone who has looked into it that much?

AB = No I don't, but if you could contact Mabel Little Rose, I think she lives in Tulsa somewhere, and she used to sing a lot with my mother. She would probably know something about it. She had a lot of Indian in her, but I couldn't tell you exactly how to contact her, she may be dead.

HF = I am married to a Muscogee (Creek) woman, and we have been going to an old, country Creek church down close to Eufalah, and I made a tape one day of the services to ask the elders about a word they were saying at the end of prayers and songs. When I got home and listened to the tape, what the church people call the old Creek hymns sound very much like what we think an old slave song sounds like. I was interested by that and have been starting to inquire about the connections that may exist between the two groups.

AB = That would be interesting. That could make a hell of a dissertation itself.

HF = I know. It's really at the fringe of my dissertation and has come about late in the process, but I think it's going to a good topic in the future. Back to your life, would you tell me your first musical memories in Muskogee?

AB = First, in the family I studied piano with my mother. All of us, there were nine in my family -- seven boys and two girls, at some time or the other studied the piano, but everybody didn't stick with it. I had a sister who was really a great pianist. Both of them could play well, but my oldest sister, Launelia had the best reputation. She played classical music. Later, I tried to get her interested in jazz. We used to play duets together, you know, classical piano duets, and then when I took up the bass we used to play together. I didn't take up the bass until my last year of high school. Before that I was playing tuba and trumpet, and the piano. I started experimenting with writing at an early age, when I

was about 13. I did a transcription for the Muskogee High School band. We played the band festival that year and we won that year with that arrangement, which was a first for us, because we were always competing with the Oklahoma City high schools.

HF = What do you remember about music outside of your home around Muskogee?

AB = When I went to high school I joined the high school band under a bandleader named Boston Russell. He taught the band then.

HF = I've heard his name mentioned a couple of times.

AB = He was quite a good taskmaster. He was the one that instilled in me the idea of practice.

HF = What kind of music did he have the band play?

AB = Marching music and stage music. The standard repertoire that was out at that time, "Under the Double Eagle," and all those marches. Then, when they had band concerts, we did the standard concert music they had out at that time, some Miller's Band Music.

HF = Any jazz?

AB = No. My first jazz came from a local band in Muskogee. They had people like John Young and Ellis Ezell. These are both saxophone players and they are both from Muskogee, and Jay McShann the pianist who was from Muskogee.

HF = Yes sir. I've heard the story about him sitting in with his sister at a piano lesson given by your mother.

AB = That's right. He used to cut our hair to play for his lessons (laughs). He'd cut hair for seven boys. I talked to him late in life. We've run into each other and played together. As a matter of fact, a few years ago he had a big concert in Oklahoma when they were honoring him and he called me up to come and down and play with him, and I did. We had a good time talking about the old days. I taught college for twenty five years over in Newark, and I used to have name musicians come. So, I had Jay and Claude Williams come and do a concert for me. When I announced him I said, "Now this next artist used to cut my hair when I was a kid and that's why I'm bald today" (laughs).

HF = I also read that Don Byas saved your life once.

AB = That's right. In Muskogee, Oklahoma there was a gravel pit where the turntable was. That's where my brothers taught you how to swim. They'd throw you in. One of my brothers threw me in and I wasn't making it, so Don jumped in and got me. He's always been a hell of a swimmer. In later years, you know, when he was over in Europe he became a great deep sea diver. He loved it. Besides being a great musician, he was a great diver. He was from a family of three. They lived next door to me on Fondulac, 632 Fondulac. They lived right next to me. His father was a jeweler, but he was also the only person in town who could repair instruments. So, he repaired instruments too. He had two other boys, Jackson Byas and Vincent Byas, and Don Byas -- his real name was Carlos Byas. We used to call them the three wise men because they were good at whatever they did. Don was the musician, and Jack was a mathematician. He was teaching math at Howard University. Vincent was a linguist. I know one time he was over in Venezuela teaching people how to speak Venezuelan (laughs). They were all smart. The mother was a highly intelligent woman. She was a school teacher.

HF = You talked about Ellis Ezell having a local band in Muskogee. Do you remember other name groups coming through Muskogee?

AB = Yeah, T. Holder. You know, he had a son that I taught when I taught high school for one year [in Muskogee]. His son Albert Holder was a fine tenor singer. His dad, T. Holder, had a band and they used to come through Muskogee. My first big band was Andy Kirk. I understand that Andy's band was originally T. Holder's band, and Andy took it over because T. Holder wasn't a very good businessman. He was doing wrong things with the money, so all the guys wanted to replace him as the leader. I didn't know all this. I found it out when I joined the band with Andy. The Carolina Cotton Pickers was another band that used to come through there too, and the Sunset Royals were a good band.

HF = After high school you left and went to New Orleans.



AB = That's right and I had a great experience there with the different people I worked with, all stalwarts of jazz during that period. I was in school, so I never did make the riverboat band trips up to Saint Louis and back, but I played on the local jobs in New Orleans with [those groups]. Their original bass player was really one of my great inspirations. His sound was what I was trying to reproduce when I was playing bass. All I never knew was [his name was] Little Al. He was a little short cat, but boy he could play. He got a sound out of the bass that was similar to Jimmy Blanton. When I heard Jimmy, he reminded me of Little Al. Those two people, I tried to emulate their sound when I was playing. When I was in New Orleans, the teacher there who was a great inspiration was Allegretto Alexander. Allegretto was an excellent musician. He played piano and trumpet. He had charge of the jazz band and also the concert band, so I played in both of them. First, I played tuba and then they didn't have a good bass player, so I took up the bass and a nun, Sister Leticia, was my first teacher really. I'd been just playing without a teacher, but she was my first teacher. I got good enough to make the band, and people liked my bass playing, so I played less piano and more bass. My name was made on bass.

HF = What happened during your service years?

AB = I played in the Navy band. What happened was I had finished college, [and] I got my B.A. down at Xavier, and then I went to Cleveland, Ohio. I had some good friends up there and they said, "Come on up." So, I went up there and worked with a band named Ernie Freeman, but I was 1-A for the Army. This Navy man came through conscripting people for the Navy band who said, "All you have to do is play in the band." I said, "This was for me," and I volunteered for that instead of getting drafted into the Army. I stayed four years in there.

HF = After the service, you went back to Muskogee and taught at Manual Training?

AB = That was after I played with Andy Kirk. I played with Andy Kirk for a year. After I got out of the Navy, I went back to Muskogee, and Andy Kirk's band came through Tulsa.

So, we drove over there to hear him, and during the intermission the bass player was late getting back, and I asked Ben Thigpen, who was the drummer, if I could sit in. He said, "Kirk, this kid says he can play, can he sit in?" Kirk said, "Sure." So, I played and they liked it and they hired me. After a year with him, Stuff Smith, the great violinist, [found us] playing at the Band Box in Chicago. He asked me and Floyd Smith, the guitar player, to join him. He said, "You won't have to travel. We have a house band right here." We decided, "OK." So, I left Andy to do that and that job lasted one night. Stuff was so impetuous and he did any thing that came to his mind. This beautiful lady passed the bandstand while we were playing and he reached over and grabbed her in the wrong place. Come to find out it was the boss's wife. The job was over (laughs). So, I went back to Muskogee and that's when I taught for a year.

HF = This would be 1948?

AB = Right. I enjoyed that time. We won it for marching that year.

HF = Was Manual Training well equipped with musical instruments?

AB = No, the school had very few instruments. I forgot to tell you when I was in high school, I was playing the tuba and it was wired up with rubber bands. I was playing a solo on "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny." At the end of it is (sings four descending low notes) dooh, dooh, dooh, dooh. And before I hit the last note it fell apart, CLANG. The bandmaster said, "We need a new horn." So, they bought a new tuba. When I was teaching there we didn't have too much funding. We used to raise money to buy uniforms. One time we were ready to participate in the Armistice Day parade in Muskogee. We went down and the parade marshall showed us where we were supposed to go. I said, "OK" Finally, the horses passed and he said, "Now." I said, "Are you kidding?" I blew my whistle and told my kids we were going to march right back up to the high school and we didn't play. Well, they made a big furor about it in the paper. What happened was that somebody had decided I was right in taking that action and when they had their Christmas

Day parade, they invited us again, and this time they put us in the right place. We won that year.

HF = What is your opinion of race relations from when you grew up in Muskogee?

AB = It was a racist territory. My dad had a lot of respect in the city because he worked at Muskogee General Hospital. He was a highly respected man and we got good treatment from almost all the white people, if they knew us. As a matter of fact, at one time we lived outside of the city limits, on South 6th Street, near Coody's Creek. When we moved into the city, we wound up on the west side on 17th Street and Court. At that time there weren't many Blacks in that area. Whites lived next door to us that we played with every day. But it was definitely racist. If you rode on the bus you had to ride in the back. It was always something, little subtle things, you know. We stayed by ourselves though, we didn't have to bothered with it.

HF = What I have learned is that the Black community in Muskogee was strong enough that, perhaps, the segregation didn't bother that community so much.

AB = It's wasn't as bad as it was in outside places. Go outside of Muskogee and you could see it more. Like I say, we lived right next door to the superintendant of schools, Superintendent Holmes. He was right around the corner from us and we used to play together because our backyards crossed over into one another. We'd get tired of them, or mad at them or whatever, and we'd tell the white kids, "You'd better go on or we're going to rub black on you." And they would take out, but nothing really serious.

HF = The musicians who left Muskogee as children were Clarence Love, Joe Thomas, and Walter "Foots" Thomas. Did you know any of them?

AB = I heard of Clarence Love, but I didn't know him. I worked with a guy named Eddie Hill, who I liked, and he used to talk about Clarence Love all the time.

HF = Did you know the Thomas Brothers.

AB = I knew both of them. Walter worked for Cab Calloway. Before I got into the business Cab's band came through Muskogee, and I had a cousin named Arveece Andrews

who was singing with Cab. So, she stayed at my house, and she had a husband with her, and he stayed. And, Foots Thomas stayed. Foots later went into the booking business. He worked with the Shaw Agency. He booked me in later years with a small group. He was a good tenor player.

HF = And Joe Thomas? Is he still living?

AB = I think he's living in New Jersey, not far, right across in Newark somewhere. I haven't seen him in 10 years, and that's when I was teaching over in Newark. I know Don Lamond, he's a drummer from Oklahoma City. He's down in Florida doing the Walt Disney thing. He works with that band and he's got a good, steady job there.

HF = Did you know Hobart Banks?

AB = Yes, but he was older than me. When I first got my bass, they would let me sit in with them, and I would learn. They didn't pay me nothing, but I was learning. That was outside of Muskogee. I don't know if he was a brother or relative of Hobart Banks, but he would let me sit in.

HF = Where were some of the places dances would take place in Muskogee?

AB = In the Grand Ballroom on South Second.

HF = The Grand Ballroom that used to be the Convention Hall?

AB = Yeah, and the Deluxe Ballroom on North Main. Those were two places that I played a lot. All those bands that came through, the territory bands, like Ernie Fields' band [played there]. There were a lot of good players in that band. As a matter of fact, one of the fellows I mentioned, John Young, worked with Ernie Fields for a long time. Funk Wiley was the drummer.

HF = Did you know Barney Kessel growing up at all?

AB = Oh sure, Fruitcake is what we called him because his teeth are jagged (laughs). He was a good player. His folks had a second hand clothing store down on South Second. Barney used to come up and jam with us a lot at the Deluxe Ballroom and the Grand

Ballroom. He worked with Funk Wiley and them sometimes. I wasn't good enough to play with them then, but I used to go up and watch. In later years we ran into each other.

HF = What do you think made him such a good player?

AB = He practiced all the time. He was back in the back there playing, and he was talented. He had natural talent. The last time I saw him was in New York with his own group, I think. Anyhow, they were playing at the Blue Note, and I walked in and I said, "Fruitcake!" He turned around and said, "I knew it had to be somebody from Muskogee." We had a good time. He was a great player. He told me he used to take Charlie Christian's records and learn from them.

HF = What happened after you left Muskogee the second time.

AB = I went on the G.I. Bill to get my Master's at New York University.

HF = What are some of your memories of New York in the early 1950s?

AB = Well, I had gotten married in 1946, and started at NYU in 1948. When I came to New York I was playing in a taxi dance band down on 47th and Broadway. In those kinds of joints they'd sell a row of tickets to the girls they had working there, and then the fellows would come in. Every time they would dance they would have to buy a ticket. So, the boss didn't want us to jam and practice blow or anything. They wanted us to play about one chorus and that was it, so they could snatch another ticket. Later, I took a job as an orderly at the Harlem Hospital, and played this taxi band joint, and went to school. At that time I was married and had two kids, and the other one was on the way. I needed to work. Finally, I made contact with Teddy Wilson, and started working at the Savoy Ballroom with different big bands, like Lucky Millinder. My reputation started getting around and I started getting good work, so I didn't have to work so many jobs. I could just play music and go to school. I was with Cab Calloway around the time I was down to my last few points for my Master's at NYU. I had joined and we had to travel. The teacher in the education course gave me an assignment where every town I went to I had to write a paper on the education system there. So, I did that. I sent in about three and

the next letter [from him] said, "That's enough. You got an "A" in the course." I finished my course work and then later I took my examinations in Instrumental Teaching on the Secondary Level, and I got it.

HF = During the 1950s, you played with a number of the biggest names in jazz.

AB = Yes, when I was freelancing I ran into John Hammond. I did a lot of recording for him when he had the Vanguard label. I don't care who was recording he wanted me to play bass on it. I recorded with a lot of people, Buck Clayton, a lot of people.

HF = What are some of your favorite recording sessions from that period?

AB = I don't know. I did so many of them.

HF = Tell me about your recording with Billie Holliday.

AB = I was on her last album. At that time, she had just about lost her voice, but she could still interpret the lyrics. She changed. Her voice was hoarse and she was just about out of it, but listen to the record and I think it's a classic. It's real jazz. She was a nice person to work with. I never worked with her at night. I worked with Carmen McRae, Sarah [Vaughan], Ella Fitzgerald, but I never went out on the road with Billie. I was on the road with Carmen, but not Sarah or Ella. I was on a lot of shows with Ella.

HF = How did the Duke Ellington connection come about?

AB = I was working with Billy Taylor at the Hickory House on 52nd Street. Duke came in there and sat down in the corner. I said, "Billy, hurry up and get off I want to meet Duke. I'd like to meet him." Billy said, "Ok. One more tune." So, we played one more tune and he was gone. I didn't get to meet him, but in the next couple of days I got a call from his office and they wanted to know if I wanted to join the band. That's how I got it. He must have been in there scouting me and decided he got to have me, so he called.

HF = Do you agree that Duke Ellington just dressed up the blues for his more famous compositions?

AB = That's true. He'd take a blues form, but he used chords and substitutions, and his melodic approaches were so different that you couldn't recognize it as the blues unless you

stop and analyze it. Things like "Sophisticated Lady," that's not a blues progression, and you've got a lot of other things that aren't. A lot of his suites are based on blues progressions.

HF = Will you talk about the Duke meets Coltrane session you played on?

AB = People ask me, "Did you all rehearse?" No, we didn't rehearse. As a matter of fact, I was late for that date because at that time I was living in what they called a Quonset hut in the Bronx that was set up for veterans. I didn't even have a car. I had to take my bass and walk about a half mile to the bus stop and get on the bus. Then, I had to ride the mile and a half to the subway and get the subway down to Penn Station. Then, from Penn Station I'd take what they call the 2, and went under the river over into Jersey to Rudy Van Gelder's studio. So, when I got over there I had to take a cab to the studio, and I was late, but I couldn't help it. I started in plenty of time, but stuff can always happen. I got there and Duke and Trane were at the piano on the piano bench. They were going over something and got it together and Duke said, "OK." So, I'd sit around with the bass, and I'm listening to what they are doing and catching it, and he'd say, "Well, let's try one." OK, we tried one, and that's how it happened, but there was no music written at all. There was no one on the date but me and Duke and Sam Woodyard as the rhythm section, and Coltrane on the front. Sometimes his drummer and bass player, Elvin Jones and Jimmy Garrison, would play. Sometimes we would mix it up. I would play with Elvin and Sam would play with Jimmy, and vice-versa. Then, we did some things together. That's way it came out, but it was an inspired date. Some times you would do one take. Duke never liked to go over and over on something.

HF = And the Coleman Hawkins session?

AB = There again, I remember on "Mood Indigo" we got through and we were listening back, you know, and Rudy Van Gelder said, "Well, what do you want to do Duke, you want to take another one?" Coleman Hawkins said, "Yeah, I think we ought to do

another one." Duke said, "Don't touch it!" [Coleman Hawkins] was very excited about working with Duke. He was very excited to be doing it.

HF = Would you say Three Swinging Bells is your best album?

AB = I think they are right. That was the best jazz album. The other three were done for commercial reasons. They stayed on the best seller for quite a while. There were all three on at one time. Those were hot TV shows, Peter Gunn, Victory at Sea, and 77 Sunset Strip. I wrote the music for a reason, to sell. See, in that time people weren't buy jazz like they do today. I was trying to make it compatible for people who didn't really go out for jazz. People knew these tunes because they'd been watching [TV] and [the records] zoomed to the best-seller list.

HF = Are you playing actively today?

AB = Not bass. I'm playing piano.

HF = Why did you stop playing bass?

AB = I had to quit after a surgery, but I might play again someday.

HF = I played piano with Clark Terry. I made several dates with Clark. I went over and did some European jazz concerts in the summer most recently. I traveled with Louie Bellson the drummer, he was with Duke too, and we traveled all over Europe and South America. I also did a lot of things with Wynton (Marsalis) at the Lincoln Center in New York. I gave a lecture before the concert and I've been doing several of those. I was at the University of Kentucky and did a lecture/demo. I've done two in New York just last week and the week before. I got one coming up in Norwalk, Connecticut with Norwalk Symphony. Duke's band is under the leadership Paul Ellington now, his son. They are going to be playing and I'll be talking before the concert, but I don't know if I'll play or not. I'm an elder citizen now, so I don't do so much playing, but whenever they want me I'll play. I get a lot of calls for bass and I tell them, "I'm not doing it right now." Maybe later I'll get back to it.

HF = Finally, why do you think so many great jazz musicians came out of Muskogee?



AB = I think because the territory was a spontaneous place. We were free to operate, even under the conditions, and experiment any way we wanted to. We weren't chained down by any set ways to play and perform. That way you get musicians who are individuals, and I think that's what makes them stand out, an individual's approach to the music. In a lot of places if you don't play a certain way, you are not accepted. In Oklahoma, if they liked it you were accepted, it didn't matter if so-and-so did it, or if somebody else did it. You didn't have to match. In other words, a trumpet player didn't have to sound like Louis Armstrong to be appreciated.

APPENDIX G

HUGH FOLEY INTERVIEW WITH BARNEY KESSEL

## **Hugh Foley Interview with Barney Kessel**

Recorded 12 May, 1996, Muskogee, Oklahoma

HF = Hugh Foley

BK = Barney Kessel

PK = Phyllis Kessel

HF: What were your parents names?

BK: Abraham and Ruth.

HF: The addresses listed in the city directory for your family are 128 S. Second, and 110 South Second. What were the differences between the two?

BK: [The one at 110] was only shoes and business. The other one was a business and where I lived.

HF: The business at 110 S. Second was across the street from the Black theater called the Grand Theater, right?

BK: Yes.

HF: What do you remember about the performances at the Grand Theater?

BK: Well, the theater was not for whites, so I didn't go there, but they did have dancing there, and I played there later on.

HF: With Ellis Ezell's band?

BK: Yes. There were three other places we played, but I played there. Cab Calloway was there once, and all bands that Blacks liked, like Duke Ellington.

HF: What years would those be?

BK: I was fourteen when I was playing there.

HF: So, 1937?

BK: Yes.

HF: Did you hear any American Indian music growing up in Muskogee?

BK: Yes, it was all around. It was good, but none of it was in me.

HF: How would you describe your first musical memories of Muskogee?

BK: The hobos on the trains playing the guitar and harmonica.

HF: The tracks were only a couple of blocks from where you lived. Would you go down and listen to them?

BK: Yes, and sometimes they would be in the boxcars, always going some place.

HF: Do you remember any tunes they would play?

BK: Yes, the songs from Jimmie Rogers.

HF: Did you have a radio in the home?

BK: Yes.

HF: What did you listen to on it?

BK: All the programs like soap operas, comedies, and the mysteries.

HF: But not much music.

BK: No.

PK: Wouldn't your mother sing to you Barney?

BK: Yes, but not much.

PK: His mother was from Russia.

HF: How did your parents choose to come to Muskogee?

BK: I don't know.

PK: He knows a little bit. His father came over with another wife and four children, and one of those half-sisters is still alive. We have talked to her and she was a big influence on Barney's childhood. The first wife died and Barney's father went to St. Louis to find another wife, a younger woman who became Barney's mother. She had Barney first, and then a second child, Lester. She was from Minsk. His father was Russian, but the last place we heard he lived was Bosnia-Herzegovina before he came with his family. We think they came in through Texas. I read something from Calvin Trillin who wrote about his own father coming into this country. The story told about how one could come into this country through Texas, and we are pretty sure that's how Barney's parents came in.

HF: When did you become aware of Bob Wills?

BK: I saw them, the band and all that, when I was little, but all that did not have an effect on me.

HF: Did you ever differentiate between white and Black styles of music?

BK: No. No difference. Now or ever. All of them are inter-related.

PK: He has told me he used to go down and sit with the Black men and play guitar.

HF: I'd read where Ellis Ezell knew you played guitar because he'd seen you sitting on the hood of a car playing.

BK: Yeah.

HF: I've read where your parents discouraged you from playing music.

BK: Not really. They just didn't want me playing all the time. I was playing more than I was doing my school lessons.

HF: Is that when your father broke your first guitar?

BK: Yes, but not the second one.

HF: You went to Central High School?

BK: Yeah.

HF: And which elementary school?

BK: Jefferson, but I was in the first grade in Sequoyah, then to Jefferson, then to Central.

PK: He finished the ninth grade and that was all.

HF: What eventually convinced your parents to let you quit school and focus on playing the guitar.

BK: They never liked it. I started the guitar and I had a friend who also played. He was in this class and told me about the classes taught by the WPA.

HF: The WPA taught guitar classes?

BK: Yeah. I was 12. I went off and found the classes. The teacher was a Hawaiian man named Charlie. That was just one summer. When I was fourteen, all the bands were here. I was playing by myself in the meantime, figuring out things. I was with the white bands too, and also with the Black bands.

HF: Where would some of the white bands play?

BK: Dances, Honor Heights. One of them was [led by] Fraydor Greer, and one was [led by] Joe Harris in the thirties. There were three that I played with all the time.

PK: Let me interject by saying that he always tells the story that the lessons lasted six months at the WPA.

BK: After a while, they moved the lessons to the courthouse.

PK: And what Barney has said is that what he learned there he never had to unlearn. He taught all the children to read music, chords, harmonies, and everything. It was really good musical training.

HF: Where did you buy your records?

BK: Kroh Music.

HF: How long did you play with Ellis Ezell's band?

BK: Two years.

HF: Did you play anywhere outside of Muskogee?

BK: Just here. I was fourteen and fifteen, and then when I was sixteen I was on the road.

PK: Talk about the friend who had a collection of records that influenced you.

BK: I was fourteen. He had records by Lunceford, Basie, Benny Goodman, and Jimmy Dorsey. His name was Johnny Adams. I also played at KBIX, when I was thirteen, with my friend Cobal Parker.

HF: *The New York Times* has said that Muskogee benefitted from a spillover of musicians from Kansas City. Did they join existing bands when they came down?

BK: No, the guys settled here.

HF: Do you feel that since your parents were first generation immigrants, it was easier for them to move into a primarily Black district?

BK: No.

PK: They were Jewish in a town where there can't have been that many other Jews.

BK: Not many.

PK: You were a minority in a way, true?

BK: Yeah.

PK: And your mother didn't speak English very well.

BK: No.

PK: Did that embarrass you?

BK: No.

HF: Did you ever have any trouble being the only white in an all-Black environment?

BK: No. Not then, but the movie, *Jammin' the Blues*.

PK: Warner Brothers did not want Barney to be in the movie because he was white and every one else was black, but Norman Brantz insisted. So, they died his skin black and put him in the shadows.

HF: What can you tell me about Hobart Banks, who was born in Muskogee?

BK: I played with him. The guy was a good guy. And on the piano he was good but not GOOD, good. The material [was not his].

HF: Fluent but not original?

BK: Yeah.

HF: Will you tell me about Pee Wee Russell's connections to Muskogee?

BK: Alright. He grew up here. I never met him, but I saw him play. He was good. Goodman's style is three guys: Russell, Barney Garde, and an old Black man, [I] can't remember his name.

HF: You left Muskogee at 16, and went to Stillwater and then Norman to those high schools?

BK: Yes. One semester in Stillwater and then one semester in Norman, but I didn't finish.

HF: So, you are in Stillwater for six months, or so. Did you play in groups there?

BK: One, The Varsitonians.

PK: That's the Hal Price band. He lives in Tulsa and we see him about once a year.

HF: Did you play in a group in Norman?

BK: Yeah. The Varsity Club.

PK: So, you leave Norman and go to L.A. Why L.A. and not New York?

BK: Well, it was one or the other. There wasn't anything else.

HF: What attracted you to L.A.

BK: The ocean and the green. None of that in New York.

PK: I thought it had something to do with Hollywood too. Barney worked in a movie theater when he was really young.

BK: Four of them.

HF: Which ones?

BK: All were owned by one person, the Proctors.

PK: I think Barney was affected by all the films that he saw. And he knew the music of the movies, as well as understanding the romance of it.

HF: Once you got to Los Angeles, what kind of foundation did you think that growing up in Oklahoma gave you?

BK: Nothing. I arrived in Los Angeles with one nickel.

PK: He rode as far as Las Vegas with a friend, and then took a bus to downtown Los Angeles.

BK: The bus ride cost three dollars.

HF: Did you have a guitar with you.

BK: Yeah, and an amplifier, and a bag of clothes.

HF: And a nickel. Do you get asked a lot about why so many musicians came from such a relatively small town like Muskogee?

BK: No.

HF: You don't? Well, what you think it is that made it possible for so many stellar musicians to come from such a small town as this?

BK: I don't know.



HF: Well, when I figure it out, I'll let you know.

BK: Ok.

HF: Do you think that there is anything distinctive about the musicians who came from Muskogee, whether it is Don Byas, Jay McShann or yourself?

BK: Players, good players. A lot of them are good players, but not original.

HF: Often, when people write about your career they tend to focus on the people you have played with. What do you think is your most significant contribution to American music?

BK: One. I was 16 and I was with Charlie Christian, and I was telling myself then that I would not take licks from him. I said I would do it [my own way].

PK: So, at 16 he knew he needed to develop his own style.

HF: You are saying that you took what you learned from him and took it to a new place.

BK: Yeah. And the arrangements of mine that are good, and the tunes that are good. Some of them have good words. And, always, always, always, when a kid comes up to me, I help them, all the time, and the trio work.

PK: I think he means the things that he feels he was the first one to do, replacing the piano with the guitar.

HF: Do you mean that you put the guitar up front in the jazz trio instead of the piano?

BK: Yeah, and the first to use an oboe in jazz.

HF: Very little is written about your work on the Elvis Presley films, what did you do on those?

BK: I was in the band at Paramount for four pictures.

HF: Were those sessions done live, with the band playing and him singing?

BK: Yeah.

HF: What was a typical Elvis session like from your perspective?

BK: They moved along very quickly because of Paramount. He was a good guy and I spoke with him all the time. He was a good guy, I liked him, but he wasn't a good player, about three chords and that's it.

PK: But you've said he was very polite.

BK: And certain things I liked about his singing. Not all of it, but some.

HF: What do you think is the difference between jazz and blues.

BK: Jazz has the blues in it, but blues doesn't always have jazz in it.

HF: What do you remember most fondly about your youth in Muskogee?

BK: All the bands I was in. All the guys were good friends. Not all of them were good players, but good fellows. The singers were good. This part of it is first for me.

HF: You've mentioned you'd like to go through the list of jazz musicians on Dr. George Carney's list of Oklahoma jazz musicians and tell me what you think of them.

BK: Yes, the ones I know. Chet Baker was one of the best vocalists and trumpet players. The trumpet playing is him and nobody else.

HF: Aaron Bell?

BK: He was fair for me.

HF: Earl Bostic?

BK: Good, but not a good jazz player.

HF: Don Byas?

BK: I was once in Holland and played with him. He was not all him, he was also Coleman Hawkins. There was a lot in him from Coleman Hawkins. He was a good player. He did a lot of good things, but not as many good things as [Coleman Hawkins].

HF: Ellis Ezell?

BK: He was a good horn player and had the band, but he was fair. The guy is a good person and good player.

HF: Ernie Fields?

BK: The bands were not good bands, but fair. I was friendly with him.

HF: Wardell Gray?

BK: He was good, but not original. He was like Lester Young, but he was playing good all the time, but it wasn't him.

HF: Did you know Terrence Holder?

BK: Good, but not GOOD.

HF: Don Lamond?

BK: Very good. A good guy, and a good friend of mine, but I didn't know him here. He recorded with me.

HF: Ed Lewis?

BK: Yeah. He is good but it's not his voice.

HF: Joe Liggins?

BK: He is not jazz, but more like rock and roll and the others.

HF: R & B type?

BK: Yeah.

HF: Clarence Love?

BK: I never heard him, but a few guys I know who played with him said he was good, but I don't know.

HF: Cecil McBee?

BK: Good bass player, but not for me.

HF: Howard McGhee?

BK: Yeah, GOOD.

HF: Jay McShann?

BK: He is a good player and a fine guy and I would go hear him, but I don't think his bands were at the top.

HF: Roy Milton.

BK: He is not jazz.

HF: More R & B.

BK: Yeah.

HF: Pat Moran?

BK: I saw her, but I'm not sure now.

HF: Marilyn Moore?

BK: I met her once but I never saw her sing.

HF: Oscar Pettiford.

BK: Yeah, one of the best bassists, one of five all-time.

HF: Marshall Royal.

BK: Alright, but not anything from him.

HF: Jimmy Rushing?

BK: GOOD. GOOD. GOOD.

HF: Pee Wee Russell.

BK: One of the three who influenced Goodman.

HF: Moe Schneider.

BK: Good, but he was like Jack Teagarden. He was like that, but not as good as Teagarden. I was in a band with him. He was good but not original.

HF: John Simmons.

BK: Good, but none of it was him.

HF: Kay Starr?

BK: Yeah. I was in the same band with her. We joined Charlie Barnett's band on the same day.

HF: Jack Teagarden was born in Texas but raised in Oklahoma City.

BK: Yeah, he was one of THE BEST.

HF: Lee Wiley?

BK: Good, not all original. Some of it is Billie Holliday, but good.

HF: Claude Williams?

BK: Good.

HF: Dempsey Wright?

BK: He was a good musician, not original, but good.

HF: Stan Wrightsman.

BK: I was with him in Los Angeles. He is good.

HF: Any of the rock or R & B guitarists from Oklahoma appeal to you?

BK: No, that is not my style. It's not me.

HF: Is there a complete discography of your work?

PK: Morris Summerfield, who wrote *The Jazz Guitar*, is working on it.

HF: What has been the biggest hurdle for you to overcome as a result of the stroke?

BK: I have the words in here, but they won't come out.

HF: I see you are moving the fingers of your left hand as if you were playing the guitar, does that mean you still pick up the guitar?

BK: No.

PK: Wait a minute. Tell the truth. He has a student. She is a very accomplished player. Just as I was encouraging him to get back into it, the phone rang, and it was a student who had studied with him in the 1970s who had been looking for him. Now, she flies in from San Francisco once a month to take a lesson and I want him to do more because he has so much to give, and he can move his left hand fine.

HF: What music do you listen to at home?

BK: Jazz and classical, all the time.

HF: Do you listen to your own music?

BK: All the time. All of it is good for me, when I did it and now.

APPENDIX H  
RADIO INTERVIEW WITH BARNEY KESSEL

## **Radio Interview with Barney Kessel**

Used by Permission from Barney Kessel

Recorded for Radio Station KTWN-FM, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Circa Winter 1981

I = Interviewer (name unknown)

BK = Barney Kessel

I: I'd like to start out chronologically, going back to your early days of guitar playing. Being a fellow Oklahoman with the late Charlie Christian, was he as big an influence on you as on other guitar players?

BK: Yes. He was an influence and he was, at the time, the greatest influence on me as a guitar player. The thing is I had many, many things that influenced me in my music, as well as guitar. There were other sources. I worked in a theater when I was a kid and I heard all these musicals that came out that had all of these songs that had later become standards. I heard the way they were originally treated. I heard the verses to these songs. I also became very much interested and fell in love with the music of Debussy and Delias. So when I say, I don't know about the other people, that Charlie Christian was a great influence and probably my greatest influence at that time and as a guitar player.

I: Are there now guitarists that you would say are an influence on you, sir?

BK: I would say these things continue to be influences. There were additional ones that came in to being as far as jazz. There were various big bands. People like Duke Ellington, as far as the compositions, as far as the way they treated these things. There were other influences even at the time with Charlie Christian. There was Lester Young on tenor saxophone, and the early Nat King Cole when he had his trio before he became a singer, a stand up singer. There was, of course, Charlie Parker. I think since Charlie Parker the greatest influence was Bill Evans. These are the influences. Most of the sources have not been on guitar. Obviously, the ones that were on the guitar were very deep because they were not only musical influences, but ones on the instrument as well.

I: Jazz is so distinctly American, and it has gone through a lot of changes just like the country has. Now you've seen a lot of the changes and played in a lot of the different varieties like swing, the big bands, like Shaw and Barnett and others. Then, there is the Latin influence. Now, we are into the quote-unquote fusion period. Do you have a favorite of those different eras Barney?

BK: No, I don't. You see all of that is very subtle thing. I don't look at it as though I am, for instance, drawn into the influence. I look at it as though I absorb those influences into me. It's whether you walk into a room and absorb the elements of the room into you, so that when you leave those things that were in that room are in you and you are bigger for having absorbed them, or whether the room absorbs you, and you lose your identity. Most of the people lose their identity by being absorbed from one thing into another. Women do this in fashion. Men do this in the way that they act. Musicians do this. They say, "What are you into right now?" They don't say, "What's into you?" They say, "What are you into?" The thing that you are into is the thing that is absorbing you. I'm not trying to be cute with words, but it's a very subtle difference that has deep meaning. Most musicians have fads like love affairs and at the time they are absorbed by that thing. They are into blues. They're into bossa nova, instead of thinking of themselves as being an individual, always maintaining their individuality, always letting those elements that are in the particular thing be absorbed by them into their own mainstream so that they grow bigger. They grow broader.

I: That is a very subtle difference, whether you absorb it or it absorbs you.

BK: Yeah, it's just like you doing the work that you do now, and I learned that you studied with Lawrence Olivier, elocution, and phrasing, pronunciation, and all these things. And to hear you a year later I would still want to hear you, and it be you, and you talk the way you want to talk, but subject to what you have learned that you have absorbed into your mainstream. It should always be apparent that you are you. In other words, if I went to Spain for a year and came out and played, it shouldn't sound like all of



a sudden that I have lost my identity, but rather that it's obvious that Barney Kessel has spent some time in Spain, but obviously it's Barney Kessel.

I: You are definitely an individual sir and it shows through in your music. What inspires you to be a music man?

BK: There are many things really you could comment on. It's really difficult to put it into words. The main reasons it's difficult to put into words are two things: One, it's difficult to choose word symbols to convey a feeling. The other thing is word symbols really being inadequate to express feelings quite often are taken and mistaken for something else. When I use certain words, people might think it means one thing, and it really means another. It actually adds to the confusion, and I'm not trying to be confusing. For instance, when people come up and they say, "You sort of get clear sound out of the guitar," or "you get a bright sound," or they say, "it's kind of direct." Those words mean nothing to me, but they mean something to them. What they mean to them doesn't mean the same to me. If I tell a repairman to fix the amplifier so that I can get more of a clear sound, or a clean sound, what is clear to him is not clear to me. These words are really inadequate to express something. First of all, you can't use words to express a feeling. You can't use words to tell someone how you feel about having a feeling of the presence of God, or how it feels to be in love with a woman, or to describe the succulent flavor of a delicious steak you had. The reason they are inadequate is because the person receiving the words from you does not in any way experience the dimension of the experience that you did. Therefore, it's inadequate. You can just tell them about it. You can just let them know that an event occurred, but they can not savor the dimensions of it. As far as what it is, it's mostly arriving at a point of realizing that the most important thing in life, for me, is to learn how to live, just how to live life; how to live it in several stages so you can get through the business of life without it eating up all your energy, without it adding to your frustration, without it making you sick, without making you angry, or making you negative. To get through that in quick enough time, in short order, so that you can leave

enough time to be able to enjoy the life, and even take a step forward and spend some time and energy in making steps towards growing spiritually. I do not look at myself as a musician, or as a guitar player. I look at myself as a human being with the possibility of growing spiritually if I put in the time and energy. And, if I do, then what it is that I feel about it, I can then express through the music. It is not as if I'm blue or sad and because I pick up the guitar and play it, or I make a record, or whatever, that all of sudden I'm no longer blue. It's not that way. The music is an expression not an impression. It's not something that changes my being. Therefore, as far as being a musician or a guitarist, these are ways of looking at myself that are further down the line. There are parts of me, but you can look at yourself in many roles. One can look at themselves as a husband, as a father, as a member of a community, as a musician, as a writer. Where I see myself as a musician and a guitar player is several rungs down the ladder. The first one really is being a human being that has the possibility to evolve if you make the effort. But, in order to do that, you've got to learn how to live. As much as we all want to learn how to grow spiritually and how to have a good, good life, the fact is that we can't even begin to make any kind of continuous effort, effort with continuity, as long as the daily cares of living bog you down: the problems of life, the interaction with people, bad health, problems over money, problems over work. These things absorb our time. Even though, way, way back in our mind there is a little part of our mind that says, "I sure would like to be better. I would like to do better. I would like to be great guy and have a lot of fun, and have a lot of happiness." We only have flashes and glimpses of that, moments, and the rest of the time it's back to the chain gang. And the chain gang is the daily humdrum things that are expected. You've got to pick up the cleaning. You've got to get that tire fixed. You've got to pay that bill. It's normal to have the day-to-day living, but the art, the skill, is to handle it in a good, responsible way and get it out of the way, because that's not why we're here. We are here to grow. We are not going to grow with any kind of continuity unless we can have the time and don't make the effort, and we're not going to do it tired. We are

not going to at the end of a day of frustration sit down and say, "Gee, how can I evolve?" We are going to say, "Gee, I need a beer, and I need a shower, and I need to just rest and get quiet and maybe have a cigar, or whatever, and just kind of cool it." So, we do need to learn how to live, how to interact with people, how to meet our responsibilities, how to take care of things, and mostly how to do those things that we have made agreements with ourselves to do.

The way I started out, Brian, was that it came to me that one of the things I could do was sort of move toward a life doing more and more of the things I want to do, instead of things I have to do, and being very careful of what I take on as responsibilities. The responsibilities I take on, I elect to do so. I call them making agreements with yourself, like agreeing that you are going to lose ten pounds, or that you are going to get an hour more sleep every night, and being careful that you don't make any agreements you don't intend to keep. It's worse not to keep the agreement than it is not to have made it in the first place. In other words, it's better not to make an agreement to lose ten pounds and stay the way you are because you haven't gone against yourself. You haven't let yourself down. If you don't keep your agreements with yourself, you devalue yourself in front of yourself, saying "I'm a loser. I can't do anything. I can't even keep my word to myself." Be careful of what you promise yourself to do.

I: What inspires the songs these days. Where do the ideas come from for the songs?

BK: They come from a lot of different things, associative thinking, associative thinking. One thing is that I've been doing it for so long that I'm hearing music in my head a lot of the time. I even wrote a song called "I'm On My Way," on an album called Barney Plays Kessel, that all started out because I was on a train and I was hearing the particular rhythm pattern that the train was making on the track at a certain time. It was a certain rhythm and I wrote the rhythm down, and then I wrote the melody that I thought fit the rhythm. Things like that. You're hearing water dripping out of a pipe late at night and it will go, "poon, *tpoon*, tpoon, *tpoon*." There are many sources. I never force it. I don't sit down

and say, "I'm going to write between ten o'clock and eleven in the morning and whatever comes, comes." It's just that if I leave myself open for inspiration, when it comes, it comes so fast that it's all I can do to catch the dictation, the internal dictation. I carry around little music pads with me, or recording machines sometimes, so that I can either play it on the guitar, or sing it. I'm sure this is something that happens with many musicians who say, "You should have heard the song I forgot. You should have heard the song that I dreamed last night and then woke up and couldn't remember." So, it comes from different sources, without me forcing. If I were to discipline myself though, if I have an assignment of "You've got to come up with eight songs by next Tuesday. One has to be a tango, one of them has to be a jazz waltz, a march, or whatever, but it's dictated. I would be able to do that because of the skills I have and it would all be right, and it would all be correct, and *maybe*, some of them would be good. But the difference in that and in the way I do it is that none of it would be inspired. You've got a gig to do. You've got to have it by next Tuesday. It's like doing the repair work on the automobile. The lady wants it by four o'clock today and so you're really grinding it out by the pound. What you draw on then is your experience and your training. You do not draw on inspiration, because inspiration is something you can not will. You can only leave yourself receptive for it. I'll tell you what inspiration is like, and what it's not like. For instance, when you are sitting in your living room next to a fire and you see your little kitty-cat, you try to catch it, but it keeps running away from you. If you sit down by the fire, the first thing you know it might come around you and jump on your lap. Inspiration has to do that. Inspiration has to come to you by you being receptive to it, rather than you forcing it.

I: Are you still recording for Concord?

BK: Yes. I haven't recorded for them in quite a while, but I'm recording two albums on April 1st and April 2nd in San Francisco. One is going to be a trio album with bass and drums. And one will be my first solo album.

I: I understand that Concord records what they consider "good." From what I understand their artists have a lot of creative control over what they record. Do you have this kind of creative control over these two albums you are getting ready to record?

BK: Yes, I do. I don't know how other people record, and I do like to have creative control, but I also like to have the feedback of the people who are there. I don't mind it at all if they tell me that the song that I'm playing could be played a little bit slower, or if I could add a little more to it? Or, could I do certain things to a song? Or, should I even record it? Or, could I replace it with another song? When they leave it to me to make the final decision, that's great, but I also like them to bring up what's in their mind because the only way you can really work together is to get feedback from people. You need feedback to know how you are doing, because if you didn't get feedback from people, you could just as easily buy a box of groceries and move into a cave and begin to tell yourself you are Napoleon. And there's no one to tell you that you are not. We need feedback from people. We don't have to act on it, we don't have to move with it, but we need to know that is what is in their thoughts. If I play all night long and no one is applauding, I need to know why they are not applauding.

I: Can you tell me a little bit about your solo album coming up, Barney? Will it be original compositions or new material?

BK: Mostly not. It will be either standards or be some songs that have been written in the last few years. I'm mostly guided by when I'm playing at night, as well as when I'm recording. The only requirement I have is that I feel hot about the song, emotionally involved with the song. I can do a better job of playing something if I'm emotionally moved by the song. I don't play it because it's popular, or even if it's the thing to do. For instance, there are any number of musicians that play a song called "Spain" by Chick Corea, or they play "Giant Steps" by John Coltrane. I don't particularly like those songs, and I'm not moved by the pressure of having to make a comment on those songs, because it seems to be the thing to do, like everybody should play on these songs to show people

that they are hip. The main thing I have to do is answer to myself. So, while I have nothing against John Coltrane, Chick Corea, or their compositions, when I think of all the beautiful songs, and my time and energy, and what I could be doing with it, those songs do not come up as possibilities as songs for me to make a comment on because there are so many others I could play. It's not being swayed by a particular thing. I've got nothing against the people or particular songs, they just don't move me. So, why should I do them?

I: How did the Great Guitars begin with Herb Ellis and Charlie Byrd?

BK: I don't remember which year it was, but that came about around 1975 when I was contacted by a promoter in Australia, named Kym Bonython, and he told me that he was planning a guitar show with Charlie Byrd's trio and that he had had Charlie Byrd over before as part of trio. And while he wanted him over very much, he wanted the show to be two hours long and he did not want Charlie Byrd to be playing the entire two hours. He wanted more of a variety and so he asked me if I would consider coming there and playing the other part of the show with another guitarist of my own choosing. So, I told him that I would if I could find the right guitarist. One of the names that came to mind very quickly was Herb Ellis. I also thought of Jim Hall and a couple more who would not only be musically compatible, but personally compatible. I was able to get Herb Ellis to join me to be part of that. So, we went to Australia and played part of the show. As time went on, Herb had known Charlie Byrd because they had actually made an album together, but I didn't really know him very well. As time went on, we got friendlier and friendlier, and people loved the show. It became a thing later on where Herb would ask Charlie Byrd if he would allow us his bass player and his drummer for a couple of our numbers. He said it was ok with him if it was ok with the musicians. They all agreed and we ended up using Charlie Byrd's drummer and bass player on a few numbers, and then we would take an intermission and then Charlie Byrd would come out with his trio. Then, gradually, because we all got along so well, we started thinking that it would be a good

idea if all of us ended the concert with a finale. But that was something that was not planned from the beginning, but we started that and the audience went crazy, and then we finally decided maybe we should play a few more numbers together. Then, towards the end of the tour we decided it was going so great, we get along so well, and the people like it, why not try to book some things when it is possible, when we can find the time, let's book some things together in the United States. At that point I personally joined the management as a single that Charlie Byrd had, and so did Herb Ellis. So, we all worked through the same manager and so he books us independently, or us as the great guitars, or Herb and myself as a duo, with or without a rhythm section. There's three different structures that we can work in. I guess it was about two weeks ago that I was in Kansas City with Herb Ellis and Charlie Byrd. Next month I'll be in Montreal and Chicago for about a week each time with Herb. Now, I'm on my own playing here in Minneapolis. The other night, before I was supposed to work on my own in Rockford, Illinois with a trio, meaning me, bass, and drums, who were set there. But, because the equipment wasn't right, and they couldn't get it right, I decided to play the concert alone. So, I played two hours alone. I've done that before. So, it's really a matter of being as self-contained as possible, and working within what is the best situation at the time.

I: When the three of you get together what's the atmosphere like?

BK: It's pretty much lighthearted. We have all gravitated into roles that we execute, without anybody really being appointed to these roles. For example, nobody voted on it or decreed it, but in a general sort of way, when we're out on the stage Charlie Byrd calls off the tunes. He doesn't always beat off the tempo. I may beat off the tempo or start the introduction on another song. Herb may start one. No one has said that "You are the starter of the song." Charlie Byrd usually calls out the songs, and it's not a suggestion, it's a direction. He doesn't say, "What do you think about this?" He says, "Let's play this," and we do. On the other hand, I write most of the arrangements, not all of them, and not always the best ones. There's some real good ones that Herb has come up with, and

Charlie has come up with that are delightful. But, in the beginning, for the most part I arranged most of them and still do. And I feel that I take a strong direction force, or I find that I'm sort of directing it while we're are rehearsing these songs. But once I've gotten it down, Charlie's the one that calls the song. Herb is more like a catalyst in most cases. He will sort of review the material and say, "Barney, this thing that you wrote here, or this thing that we do here, why don't we cut that." He sort of edits it. He's like a proofreader, as well as contributing his own songs and his own ideas, but he works more in that kind of way. There is always humor. They're always joking about my clothes that I wear. I would not say that I'm outrageous at all. But I would admit to and recognize that my clothes are colorful. They are not theatrical. My clothes would never qualify me for any of the rock and roll groups, but compared to them it is rather flamboyant and colorful, and I enjoy it. I get a kick out of it. They are always kidding me, like "I wonder what he's going to wear today?" We joke about different things. It's low key humor all the time and it is fun, but when we rehearse, it's really serious because we are professionals and we usually recognize that we have a limited amount of time and we have go to get the material out. Whether we're doing it by written music, or we're making it up, or whatever it is, we usually work very diligently in that time frame in a very professional way because we want to get it out in the limited amount of time that we have. We've been to Japan together, and we're going to Europe for the second time this October. We've been to Australia two times, as well as travel over the United States, and it really becomes important for me at this time in my life that I not only play with musicians that I can enjoy, and incidentally, they don't really have to be musicians who are from one particular school. It's not like it has to be people who have to be fifty years old, and have to know standards. It has to be people who make music simply that I enjoy, whatever it is. And it's very important for me to able to get along with these people. I'm really at a point where I don't want to be on tour with people who are weird and mixed up all the time. We are all mixed up a little bit sometimes, but it's the people who are mixed up all the time that drains your



energy. I'm sorry that they have problems, but I don't want to be working with those problems. Also, you know it's a matter of professionalism. If we are going to meeting in the hotel lobby to get on the bus to go to the auditorium, and the bus is supposed to be there at six-thirty, and everyone is supposed to be there at six-thirty, I want everyone to be there and getting on the bus at six-thirty. I don't want to hear somebody say, "Hey, man, I kind of goofed" and they are twenty minutes late, because it's my time they are wasting. They didn't waste their time because they used their time to do what they wanted. All I want to say to them is that if we are going to leave at ten minute to seven, that's ok too, I'll be there then because I can use that twenty minutes for me just like you used it for you. It's ok, I don't mind it. It's a matter of being professional. Of course, my own philosophy includes this: I'm not looking for perfection. I don't expect it in myself, I don't expect in others, and if I ever did get to the point of perfection, it would be a lonely world because there wouldn't be anyone to talk with. So, I don't expect that, but I am looking for it in myself, and in things, in projects, and in people, for as much excellence as I can get.

I: Where outside of the United States have you found the best response to your music.

BK: Well, I would say the two best places in the world are number one, Japan, and number two is Germany. Then I would say number three is the United States and then Australia. [The Japanese] are the way [about jazz] that we are about football. They are that way about it. Before I go back and answer your question, I will just tell you this. I don't think jazz itself is facing a big renaissance, or that it is booming, because it never was big. Jazz has never been a big element with people. There have never been great big superstars of jazz who made a lot of money and drew a lot of people where they are just waiting around the building. While that is true, what has happened is that some people in jazz do communicate. People will buy certain jazz artists, but they don't buy it as a totality. When you think about country music, or disco music, or rock and roll music, those forms of music themselves have been so popular that it has made certain people superstars, but almost anyone within that form of music has been acceptable for work.

So, even a bad disco group works because people don't really differentiate that much, and will still go see it because they are caught up in the form, or they are identifying with Saturday Night Fever. It really doesn't matter that these people have only been playing music two years, or that they are inexperienced, [people] will still go see them. Whereas, jazz as a form is not just one hundred percent acceptable, and something that the consumer just buys, but within jazz there are people that people will accept. Just because I'm touring all the time doesn't mean that anyone who picks up the guitar will going to make a living out of playing jazz on the guitar. Just because a guy in Minneapolis plays the tenor sax and plays it pretty well, it doesn't mean he's going to have a career like Stan Getz. The public does not buy the form, but comes to hear the individual. My audiences consist of three basic subdivisions: one, what I would call guitar fans. They are interested in the guitar, and not only in the kind of guitar I play. They would go hear a country picker or they would go hear a classical guitarist. They think the guitar is a wonderful and fascinating instrument, and they come to see me through their fascination with the guitar. Then, there's other people that come because of the particular kind of music I play. They would come to see a saxophone player, or a pianist or whoever that would be playng the same songs with the same treatment. They are not there to see me as a guitar player, but to hear the kind of music I play.

I: What kind of music will we be hearing tonight?

BK: I really don't like to put a name on it, because it does me an injustice. You see, anytime you label something, you also say what it isn't. If you say some color is red, you are not only saying it is red, but also that it is not black. But what if it's got some black in it? But, if I were to say jazz music that still doesn't tell anybody anything. Some people would say he's playing music of the 30s or 40s, or he's playing old Louis Armstrong stuff, or he might be playing an old Scott Joplin thing. Maybe he's playing Chick Corea style music, or Herbie Hancock.

I: I guess what I was getting at Barney is tomorrow night and Thursday night at Williams Pub, are we going to hear you solo, or are we going to hear a trio backing you up, or what?

BK: It will be with the trio. We are going to rehearse the trio, local musicians here, and God willing if it is compatible, if we get along and it works out, they'll be playing with me, and that's what I hope for. Within that trio texture, at the end of each set I play, and there will be two one hour each sets, I will be playing some solos within that. Halfway through it I will be playing some solos and they will be excused from the stand, and then they will come back and join me. I just wanted to close off the thing with your question about why [my music] is so much more popular there. They are appreciative of the music and they recognize it as an art form. It's something that is not a part of them, and their own culture, that they are now absorbing into own culture. In America, it's been around for so long, even though people don't recognize it's been through a lot of changes. Jazz at one time was a thing like disco was, or dixieland, or country-western, and so far as a lot of people are concerned it died. But it's been underground for a long time, it never really died, and it's taken on a lot of sophistication. It's become a great sophisticated art form. Whereas, early country music has not changed all that much, and it hasn't. The only sophistication has been in the recording techniques. As far as the music itself, it has not really evolved that much, and the changes it has made had moved it away from country-western music into a kind of a Madison Avenue/Nashville product, which doesn't really have the early roots. You know people today doing Hank Williams and the old Jimmie Rogers, and doing things like that when they are working for a high powered, sophisticated Nashville group, for me do not capture the flavor. They are doing the song, but in a real slick Las Vegas/Madison Avenue/Nashville type of country-western fashion that is so slick it doesn't have the essence of the real country flavor.

I: Has the same thing happened to jazz with what they call fusion now?

BK: Yes. I don't call fusion jazz. It's adulterated and I don't mean by that you've got to be eighty-five-years-old and on a riverboat to play jazz, saying "Look sonny, I remember when Louis Armstrong..." I don't mean that at all. I mean there is a certain integrity in jazz. There's something that people don't ever talk about. It's not mentioned in books, you can't go to a music school learn it. They don't even mention it. It's called inspiration, integrity, originality, innovation, called playing from the depths of your own emotional being. What it is is using devices. If you use this device or that device, or play this chord against that one, or use this little lick against that, it's going to sound real psychedelic and everyone's going to freak out. It's like playing a solo from the back of a Betty Crocker cake mix. There's no soul in it because you are not drawing on soul. Even the black groups playing out in Las Vegas are not drawing on soul. They have a big mechanical "soul button" they push and they say, "When we raise our hands this way, and shake our heads, and writhe a little bit, it will look soulful." This is because these people are not drawing on the essence of themselves, they are drawing on their personality. It's the difference between you and me meeting and you shaking hands with me and saying, "Glad to have met you Barney," because you feel that way, or because you went to a personality school that said when you leave a person, you kind of open your mouth to show your teeth, conjure up a smile which we're going to show you how to do in a mirror, and you shake the person's hand, pumping it profusely three times, and then you say, "I'm very glad to meet you." The difference in those two is that one was a heartfelt departure that welled up in you spontaneously, and one was something you learned in a course called "How to Succeed," and part of how to succeed is how to say goodbye. That's the difference and that's what's happening with people when they play jazz, or when they write music, or when they do any number of things when we meet in society. We're not letting the essence of it in us come through. We are operating by facade and personality. Joe Venuti used to call that an empty suit, because all that's happening is there is an empty suit with something in it talking, but the real depth of that person doesn't come through. Either

they have no depth or they are afraid to show it because they'll be criticized. Of course, it's a two way street, because the person is depriving themselves one of the greatest things in the world, which is to find yourself. We all do the best we can. I'm just going through the world playing, hoping people enjoy it. I'm doing what I believe, playing songs I like, and hoping people like it, and that's about it.

VITA

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