History of the Louisville Jazz Scene

The jazz scene in Louisville was vibrant and creative during the Swing Era—live jazz and jazz-based popular music attracted many patrons to local nightclubs and dance halls. Louisvillians dance to swing during regular hours, while musicians inspired by bebop jammed afterhours. In a Courier-Journal article, dated January 5, 1941, writer Charles Thomas described the scene at Haley's, a bar on the second floor of a building at 10th and Chestnut Sts. in Louisville's Negro Business District. Top black celebrities, like Bill Robinson, Ethel Waters and Joe Louis, stopped by Haley's when in Louisville, and the house band, led by the suave Davetti "Sparky" Stallard, was often joined by famous performers like Maxine Sullivan, Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway. At midnight, the club filled with dancers moving to standard swing songs and original "jump blues" tunes by the band.

Haley's was much like other local African-American nightspots, such as Swingland, the Grand Terrace, Rascal's, the Band Box and the Dipsy Doodle—intimate places where black folks ate, drank and talked while the house band supported a singer or floor show. Dancers crowded the Country Club, the Plantation, the Trianon and the Henry Clay Hotel ballroom, attracted by the swinging sounds of colorfully named bands, like Thomas Scrugg's Rhythm Syncopators, Velt Williams' Clouds of Rhythm, James Handy's Jive Five, and King Perdue and His Twelve Pirates. Known for their long stay at the Crystal Ball Terrace, the Pirates included promising young musicians like Jonah Jones, Bill Beason, Jimmy Mitchell, Rodney Richardson, Luke Stewart, Russell Bowels and Davetti Stallard. Good jazz players filled the black music scene in Louisville—some left town to tour with the top swing bands, but many moved between various local groups or formed their own outfits. Stallard led his group at Haley's and other top local black and white nightclubs; Howard "CV" Williams played drums with the Clouds of Rhythm, and toured the country with several bands before returning to Louisville to lead his own group. Local players, like Dickie Wells and Milt Robinson, distinguished themselves on the national scene in bands fronted by Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, Andy Kirk and Cab Calloway.

The most recognized African-American musicians from Louisville were singer Helen Humes and trumpet player Jonah Jones, both members of top bands and popular solo performers. Born in Louisville in 1913, the daughter of the city's first black lawyer, Humes was raised near Churchill Downs and studied piano as a child at Bessie Allen's Sunday School at corner of 9th and Magazine. In 1927, two years before graduating from high school, Humes made her first recording in St. Louis, singing "If Papa Has Outside Lovin', Mama Has Outside Lovin' Too." Her big break came nine years later when, after recording with the Harry James Orchestra, she replaced Billie Holliday in the Count Basie Band. Five years with Basie established Humes as a top jazz singer, and propelled her into a successful solo career that did not fade until 1967. After a remarkable comeback at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1973, Humes continued to perform in Louisville and New York until her death in 1981. Elliot "Jonah" Jones grew up near 16th and Magazine and learned to play trumpet at Bessie Allen's school. Before joining professional bands led by Fletcher Henderson, Lil Armstrong, Jimmie Lunceford and Cab Calloway, Jones played in the 40-piece Community Center Band with his friends Dickie Wells, Milt Robinson and Bill Beason, under the direction of Lockwood Lewis. Jones and his young bandmates were not allowed to play jazz or popular music at the Community Center, so they listened outside the black nightclubs and learned popular tunes on their own before joining the older players on the bandstand. Jones' career spanned over four decades, and his status as a top trumpet soloist was firmly set by his appearances on national television shows in the mid-1960s.

Bessie Allen, Louisville's first black probation officer, ran a home for underprivileged children and orphans located at the corner of 6th and York Sts., and was the director of the Booker T. Washington Community Center and Sunday School. With help from wealthy white friends, Allen bought musical instruments for the poor black children at the community center, and a band was formed around 1919 under director Ralph Brown, a graduate in music from the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Va. Ms. Allen recognized that African-American children needed positive activities to fill their recreational time and prepare themselves for careers, and she offered them the chance to develop their musical talents. Born in Henderson, Ky., in 1923, Mary Ann Fisher joined the Community Center Band when she first arrived at Allen's orphanage. Fisher was a teenager when she won talent contests at the Lyric Theater, and she quickly became a top performer in local nightclubs,

singing at the Orchid Bar and the Casablanca. Fisher earned national acclaim as a featured singer with the Ray Charles Band from 1955 to 1958. Bessie Allen's greatest gift to Louisville's black community, however, was not the fame that the performers from the center gained playing jazz and singing blues. Her lasting legacy was the establishment of a music education system for African Americans in a segregated city, a network in which an appreciation for musical knowledge was passed down from teachers like Lockwood Lewis and Ralph Brown, through the members of the Community Center Band, to future generations of local black musicians.

Walnut Street was the heart and soul of the African-American community in Louisville. Running west of the downtown, on Walnut and Chestnut Sts., from 6th St. to 12th St., the location of the black business district was less than ideal, but for African Americans in a segregated city, maintaining Walnut Street was essential for the survival of their community. Every type of business was found in the area—banks and insurance companies, theaters and movie houses, churches and funeral parlors, restaurants, cafes and nightclubs. Black audiences listened to lively jazz in nightclubs and bars like the Top Hat, Joe's Palm Room, the Joe Louis Club, Charlie Moore's, and the notorious Little Doogie Pool Hall. Walnut Street's best-known nightclub was the Top Hat, famous for its flashy, serpentine glass-block bar with neon lighting, which stretched around the main room, from one side of the front door to the other with a gap for the bandstand. Above the bar hung the photographs of top black entertainers who either played there or came in after performing in the theaters down the street. At the Top Hat, Bill Davis, owner of Davis' Record Shop, "folks were treated to the best in black entertainment. All the top names were there. From Dinah Washington and Sarah Vaughn to folks like Larry Darnell and Louis Armstrong." Patrons packed the bar seven nights a week, and cheered local musicians as they competed in late-night "cutting contests" with the best jazz musicians in the country. Swing Era players, like Roy Eldridge, Errol Garner and the members of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, usually stayed in Louisville for a few days or a week working in local nightclubs and theaters, and always went to the Top Hat for sessions after their gigs were finished. Dizzy Gillespie and other bebop players played with local performers, and musicians in the army stationed nearby at Fort Knox, like brothers Cannonball and Nat Adderley, Curtis Fuller, Junior Mance and Stanley Turrentine, also regularly jammed in Louisville's nightclubs.

Swing music was broadcast live from local radio studios and nightclubs, and top big bands, lead by Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington, played concerts at the National Theatre at Fifth and Walnut Sts., and Memorial Auditorium at Fourth and Kentucky Sts. Louisvillians went dancing every night at a variety of places, from posh nightclubs and fancy hotel ballrooms downtown to small bars and outdoor beer gardens scattered throughout the city's neighborhoods. Even high schools and junior highs held weekend dances for teenagers and kids old enough to dance. At the Club Madrid, Louisville's grandest ballroom, white dancers moved beneath a huge crystal ball to the music of the era's best dance bands, fronted by bandleaders Gene Krupa, Henry Busse and Isham Jones. Advertised as "The Showplace of Kentucky," the Club Madrid was much like a New York nightclub—employees walked through the large ballroom selling flowers for the ladies or cigars and cigarettes for the gentlemen, and a photographer roamed the crowded tables taking pictures for souvenirs of the patrons dressed in their finest clothes.

The WHAS-Radio Studio Orchestra, an all-white big band under the direction of Bob Hutsell, performed live on local radio shows and commercials. Members of the radio station's band had professional experience with top white dance bands and orchestras: Chuck Hurta played "sweet or hot" violin with Paul Whiteman; Joe Stone walked basslines for Isham Jones and Joe Venuti; and drummer Ted Otten performed with the Louisville Orchestra and later taught at the University of Louisville School of Music. White musicians worked daytime gigs with radio studio orchestras and combos, and at night booked club dates, private parties, dance jobs and show work. "Musicians had a heyday back in those days," clarinetist Jack Crutcher stated. "I had jobs running out my ears. I played all the time, every night." Crutcher played at four local radio stations, and usually had only fifteen minutes to grab his horn and run between jobs. Crutcher was also a member of the house band at the Bluegrass Room in the Brown Hotel, accompanying floor shows and providing dinner and dance music six nights a week. He played dances and private parties at the major downtown hotels, as well as dinner clubs and outdoor beer gardens. Small "jobbing" bands played one-night gigs at country clubs and high schools, playing stock arrangements of popular tunes, "society stuff and some Dixieland."

Most nightspots in Louisville were strictly segregated, and white musicians held the jobs that paid better and had more prestige. The system of separated local music cultures, however, gradually changed in the fifties.

As the popularity of swing music faded, dancehalls shut down and white and black dance bands dissolved—the closing of the Club Madrid in 1952 marked the end of the Swing Era in Louisville. Joe Brian and His Kentuckians tearfully disbanded in 1951 after twenty years of playing all the top white ballrooms in Louisville, from the Kentucky Hotel's Terrace Room to the Brown Hotel's Crystal Ballroom. In the late forties, WHAS-Radio dispersed its Studio Orchestra, although a jazz combo continued to work at the station until all live music was replaced on the local airwaves by records in the mid-fifties. The loss of steady work with good pay at dancehalls, hotels and radio stations weakened the white and black locals of the American Federation of Musicians. (The two A.F. of M. locals—local 11 for whites and local 637 for blacks—merged in 1967) When the big bands dispersed, local musicians formed small groups with bebop as their creative force and pushed the nightclub scene in Louisville to a new peak. The Civil Rights Movement brought down racial barriers and removed legal segregation in Louisville and across the South. Although many local nightspots remained segregated for a while, black and white jazz players eventually integrated in the music scene. Few older white musicians jammed in the local black nightclubs, but young white players often came down to play on Walnut Street and were accepted by black musicians.

In a Courier-Journal profile published in 1957, journalist Gene Lees described Jimmy Raney, the most recognized white jazz player from Louisville, as a witty yet modest man whose guitar playing could be wistful and powerful. Born in Louisville on August 20, 1927, the son of a sports columnist for the Louisville Times, and raised on Cane Run Road in Southwest Jefferson County, Raney started guitar lessons with A.J. Giancola at age nine, and he continued his studies while attending Valley High School. At sixteen years old, the guitarist worked his first union job at the Crystal Ballroom in the Henry Clay Hotel, and he hit the road one year later with bandleader Jerry Wald. Raney's rise from novice to top-notch professional musician was rapid—he performed with big bands led by Woody Herman, Les Elgart and Artie Shaw, as well as in small combos with Al Haig, Buddy DeFranco and Terry Gibbs. Raney settled in New York at the time when bebop was boldly carrying jazz in a new direction. As the popularity of Swing sagged, Raney naturally turned to modern jazz, as did many other young white musicians. Raney earned his highest acclaim recording with the Stan Getz Quintet and the Red Norvo Trio, and was regarded as one of the most influential modern jazz guitarists. Raney lived and worked in New York for twenty-two years before returning to Louisville in 1970.

The initial bebop craze arrived and faded quickly in Louisville, and African-American listerners soon turned their attention to R&B and gospel-influenced Soul music. Many local jazz players struggled to find gigs, and Odell Baker's bebop crew and Louis Jackson's House Rockers played dance music with a strong back beat in order to get regular work. Some local jazz musicians chased better opportunities in larger cities—bassist Leslie Grinage moved to New York, and drummer Louis Taylor traveled to Chicago where he worked with saxophonist Gene Ammons. Local musicians also joined the military and played in bands stationed across the country and overseas. Beboppers Ardel Broddie, Boogie Morton and Carrol Ramsey served in Korea during the Korean Conflict; sadly, Ramsey died in the service, and Broddie did not return to the local music scene. At one point, modern jazz was hot and many musicians in town jumped on the bebop bandwagon, but young beboppers left Louisville, and the players that remained emphasized newer musical trends. To revive modern jazz, musicians combined R&B and Soul with bebop to formed a new style, Hard Bop, which became very popular with African-American audiences.

The bebop fad may have passed, but the bebop approach to improvisation remained a pervasive influence on jazz musicians, and popular "cool" performers made bebop accessible to a wider white audience. Packaged tours featuring the best jazz players of the fifties stopped often for well-attended concerts at Memorial Auditorium on 4th St. in Old Louisville: the Festival of Modern American Jazz performance in 1953 starred Stan Kenton, Errol Garner, Dizzy Gillespie and Stan Getz; the "Birdland Stars of '55" concert featured Garner, Getz, Sarah Vaughn, Count Basie, George Shearing, and Lester Young; the "Jazz For Moderns" concerts in 1958 featured Dave Brubeck, Sonny Rollings and Maynard Ferguson with Leonard Feather as the program announcer, and in 1959 offered Brubeck, Ferguson, Chico Hamilton, and the vocal trio, Lambert, Hendricks and Ross; in 1959, the Newport Jazz Festival Tour starred Shearing and Thelonious Monk. The "cool" trend among local white players and fans was reinforced by the attempt to formalize jazz education at the University of Louisville, where Professor Maurice I. Laney taught a jazz history course.

Jazz educator Jamey Aebersold grew up in a musical family across the Ohio River from Louisville in New Albany, Ind. Aebersold's parents loved to dance and often visited the Club Madrid and Gypsy Village in Louisville during the Swing Era. Following in his older brother's footsteps, Aebersold started playing piano at age five and saxophone at age twelve. In junior high school, he read books about traditional jazz players Mugsy Spaniard and Mez Mezzrow, and bought records by Duke Ellington and Count Basie at a local department store. In high school, he was a member of the Nighthawks, a teenage dance band that included drummer Bruce Morrow and trumpet players Butch Neil and Larry Kinzer. Aebersold was fifteen when he met Don Murray and Gene Klingman at his audition for the jazz workshop at the Louisville Academy of Music. The workshops were held in the studio of the academy director, Don Murray, "Louisville's first professor of jazz," on the second floor of a building on Bardstown Road. Once a week, faculty members Murray, Klingman and Sam Dennison accompanied students on piano, guitar and bass, and taught them jazz styles and playing techniques. These three teachers exposed their students to bebop by playing records, as well as by giving lessons and running combos. "Maybe they were just saying, 'Hey, here's the latest Charlie Parker record' or something while we were leaving or getting out instruments out," adds Aebersold.

When Don Murray moved his studio from Bardstown Road to the Arts In Louisville House at 5th and Zane Sts. in Old Louisville, and decided to focus on teaching, Gene Klingman replaced Murray in his group, The Trademarks, with local black pianist Ray Johnson, who was raised near Walnut St. The band played a memorable stand at the Tap Room on 4th St. with saxophone and trumpet player Ira Sullivan and drummer Roger Wandersheid, two top-notch jazzmen from Chicago. "I can remember walking down Fourth Street one night, going to the Tap Room, and I heard somebody playing really fast," Jamey Aebersold states. "I went in…and it was Ira Sullivan sitting in with the Trademarks, and they were playing 'Cherokee.' That was the most exciting thing I'd heard up to that point in my life." The Trademarks frequently held forth at the Topaz, a beatnik hangout on Baxter Ave., and were joined there by visiting players like Pepper Adams, Donald Byrd and Herbie Hancock. Other jazz musicians made long and frequent stands in Louisville, including guitarist Wes Montgomery, organists Hank Marr and Milt Buckner, and vibraphone player Johnny Lytle. Jazz musicians in Louisville were oblivious to color—their only concern was the music—and their persistence eventually reversed the policy of segregation in the white nightclubs along 4th Street. White bars in the South End soon joined bohemian centers in the East End as interracial nightspots open to all musicians and patrons.