

“THE DEFINITION OF JAZZ”: THE BASIE BAND AT ITS BEST

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In 1936 Count Basie and his free-wheeling band from Kansas City came east and took New York by storm with their rocking, blues-based take on big band jazz. For the next decade and a half this stellar cast – which at various times included trumpeters Buck Clayton and Harry “Sweets” Edison, trombonists Benny Morton, Dickie Wells, and Vic Dickenson, tenor saxophonists Lester Young, Herschel Evans, Buddy Tate, Don Byas, Illinois Jacquet, and Lucky Thompson, singers Jimmy Rushing and (briefly) Billie Holiday, and the renowned “All-American Rhythm Section” of Basie on piano, guitarist Freddie Green, bassist Walter Page, and drummer Jo Jones – would sit atop the very pinnacle of swing.

Wearied of the road and discouraged by a drop in bookings, Basie broke up the band in 1950 and formed a swinging septet that, for a time, sported a frontline of trumpeter Clark Terry, saxophonist Wardell Gray, and clarinetist Buddy DeFranco. But Basie missed the power and glory of sixteen men swinging, so in the fall of 1951, with the encouragement of his good friend, Billy Eckstine, he began to reassemble his orchestra – with a difference. Where the original band was built largely around its corps of unique solo voices, Basie founded his new edition on an ever-growing book of strong charts by top-rung arrangers. It quickly evolved into an ensemble of amazing power and precision, but also one of many moods and colors, as strong at *pianissimo* as it was at *fortissimo*, as swinging at slow tempos as it was at fast ones. But make no mistake, this reborn unit was packed with accomplished soloists. One by one the Count brought in trombonists Benny Powell and Henry Coker, trumpeters Joe Newman and Thad Jones, and the tenor saxophone tandem of Frank Foster and Frank Wess, modern, bop-inspired players who also were completely at home in the Basie groove.

This new Basie band first recorded for Norman Granz’ Clef and Verve labels, creating two monster hits, the immortal “April in Paris” and “Every Day I Have the Blues” (featuring Joe Williams’ hip, contemporary take on the twelve-bar form). In 1957 Basie jumped to the fledgling Roulette label founded by Morris Levy, the shady, mob-connected shill who “owned” the original Birdland, the band’s unofficial New York headquarters. The magnificent boxed set, *The Complete Roulette Studio Recordings of Count Basie and His Orchestra* (Mosaic MD10 149, 10 CDs/15 LPs, total playing time: 10:46:04), documents the band’s immense five-year output for that label, encompassing fourteen-and-a-half previously released – and for the most part, long unavailable – LPs (including one two-record set), seven singles, and twenty-one unissued tracks.

It was during the Roulette period that this outstanding band became an unequalled one, “the best Basie ever had,” as the late Thad Jones would declare, thanks largely to three key personnel moves in the fall of 1957. First, Snooky Young, who had worked with Basie in the 1940s, returned to lead the trumpet section – and handle the occasional solo – with his patented blend of drive and taste. Next, tough tenor Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, who had been in the band from 1952 to 1953, returned to the fold. Basie favored Davis’ gruff, grumbling style, which, acquaintances testify, mirrored his personality, and Jaws immediately became one of the band’s most audible soloists. “Jaws was Basie’s sweetheart when it came to the tenor,” Frank Foster has mused. “He fit the band so well ’til I felt intimidated every time Jaws played.”

But Basie loved all his tenors – as he once told journalist George T. Simon, “The band has always been built from the rhythm section to the tenors and then to the rest of the band” – and he didn’t want to lose either of his “Two Franks.” So, with the re-arrival of Davis, the versatile Frank Wess moved into the vacated second alto chair, but still held on to his tenor (and flute) solos.

Then one night in South Philly, Al Grey slid into the trombone slot “temporarily” vacated by an ailing Tom McIntosh. “Count Basie came to Philadelphia, to the Pep’s Show Bar,” Grey recounted, “and I went to see the band. That night Tom McIntosh was sick, so they only had two trombone players, and the guys pointed at me and said, ‘Hey, Basie, there’s Al Grey down there, tell him to come play.’ Basie looked down and he saw me and he just did like that,” Grey explained, making the universal trombone slide motion with his right arm, “meaning, ‘Get your trombone.’ This was in South Philadelphia. I went all the way to North Philadelphia, man, and got my horn and came back.

“When I finished that night, Basie said, ‘You have a passport?’ and I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘We’re going to Europe in four days and you could have the job if you want it.’ I went to Washington, D.C., and they got me a passport into New York two days later. The next day we went into the recording studio. So I went to Europe – played a royal command performance in England right off.” And poor Tom McIntosh, who had just joined the band a short time earlier, was out of a gig. (McIntosh later built a successful career as an arranger-composer for the Hollywood studios.) By the time he left the band in early 1961 Grey’s blues-rooted, crowd-pleasing flair had made him the band’s primary trombone soloist.

And so, all of the pieces were in place when the band cut its first Roulette album, a collection of Neal Hefti charts with the strange title, $E=MC^2$ (a.k.a., *The Atomic Mr. Basie*). Jaws’ burly, raw-edged tone ignites “Flight of the Foo Birds” and “Whirly-Birds,” and Basie gets one of his best features on the jumping “mini-concerto,” “The Kid from Red Bank.” But it was a slow ballad with a simple melody and a poignant, muted statement by the seldom-featured trumpeter Wendell Culley that stole the show.

“‘Li’l Darlin’,” Foster recalls, “was brought in as a medium-tempo, sort of bounce tune. Basie listened to that and he said, ‘Let’s slow that down and make a ballad out of it,’ and it got to be one of the band’s most popular songs. Still is. That was the genius of Basie, to listen to something and decide what had to be done with it. And the arranger-composer could only have felt complemented if Basie decided to keep the arrangement, no matter what he did with it, no matter how much he chopped it up or took out of it.”

Near year’s end, once the band returned from its European triumph, Lockjaw, who preferred the flexibility of a small group format, left Basie to form one of the quintessential tenor-organ combos of the era. (He would return periodically throughout the 1960s and 1970s.) Jaws’ chair was filled by an outstanding, yet underrated, ex-Gillespie tenor man, Billy Mitchell. Mitchell’s first album with Basie presented a second set of Neal Hefti originals, *Basie Plays Hefti*. Grey gets off two terrific open-horn choruses on his feature, “A Little Tempo, Please,” and Wess’ flute is heard on three tunes. The best of these is “Cute,” which also spotlights drummer Sonny Payne’s strong yet tasteful brush work and a tautly phrased saxophone soli, five men playing – breathing – as one, sparked by the distinctive tone and articulation of Basie’s nonpareil lead alto and straw boss, Marshal Royal.

Emulating the all-Hefti format, the band’s next release, *Basie – One More Time*, comprised the compositions and arrangements of Quincy Jones. Royal gets a rare and lovely feature on Q’s nostalgic ballad, “The Midnight Sun Never Sets.” The most prolific solo

voice on these sides is the animated trumpet of Joe Newman, but the three trombonists (Coker, Powell, and Grey) have their spots, and Wess, who stands out on flute, also takes a brief and bubbly alto solo on the wonderfully titled powerhouse, "A Square at the Round Table."

Basie didn't rely only on freelance arrangers to build his book. There also were some first-rate writers in the band, and their work was presented on *Chairman of the Board*, one of the finest albums of big band jazz ever made by Basie or anyone else. Although the two Franks had written for the band before, Foster's "Blues in Hoss' Flat" and "Who, Me?" are as good as anything he ever did, while Wess' "Half Moon Street" and his six-minute exposition on the blues, "Segue in C," set a personal best. But the real revelation was Thad Jones. Legend has it that Basie had no idea that there was an immense writing talent sitting there in the trumpet section until Marshal Royal finally pulled his coat. (Legend also has it that Basie, whose watchword was "simplicity," often found Jones' penchant for complex lines, unusual voicings, striking contrasts, and uncommon instrumental combinations a bit extravagant for his taste.)

The *Chairman* sessions include four of Jones' earliest efforts, and each is a eye-opener. The stately blues, "H.R.H.," contains a richly harmonized and beautifully executed soli chorus in which Al Grey's soaring open trombone is voiced over the saxophone section. "That's the highest I ever played in my life!" Grey declared decades later. On "Mutt and Jeff," Eddie Jones' bass and Wess' flute deliver the intricate theme, followed by one of Wess' funkier flute solos on record. Jones' aptly titled "Speaking of Sounds" features unison bass and trumpet, as well as assorted reed and brass colors. And "The Deacon" has some striking brass choir effects and solid solos by the composer and Grey, with plunger.

These early Roulette recordings set the bar awfully high. With each subsequent release, the band just kept clearing it. *Dance Along with Basie*, an album of well-worn standards imaginatively arranged by Jones and Foster, serves as a reminder that Basie's men could lure dancers onto the floor with the best of them. *Not Now, I'll Tell You When* largely follows the *Chairman of the Board* format, introducing more superb charts by Jones, Wess, and Foster. There are two wonderful Benny Carter composed-and-arranged albums, *Kansas City Suite*, a collection of pieces recalling the original band's Midwestern roots (and one of the best-sounding stereo recordings ever made), and *The Legend*. Basie's "number one son," Joe Williams, also gets his due with two album-length showcases of his own, brimming with his special brand of witty, urbane blues.

Meanwhile, Frank Foster was handed a daunting task. In 1960, to honor the Count's twenty-fifth anniversary as a bandleader, Roulette decided to produce a two-LP retrospective, *The Count Basie Story*, comprising nearly two dozen Basie classics, re-recorded in stereo. But there was one problem: many of those vintage charts were head arrangements that existed only in the memories of the musicians who played them. So Foster had to transcribe these numbers from the original recordings and adapt them to the new, slightly larger ensemble.

And what he a job he did! Adding an intro here, inserting a background riff there, and setting a few new tempos, Foster brought a welcome freshness to warhorses like "Every Tub," "Topsy," and "Jumpin' at the Woodside," while retaining their original spirit. The band plays with genuine conviction and the soloists, instead of imitating Young, Clayton, Edison, Wells, and company, take inspiration from their predecessors, but create their own improvised statements. These twenty-three sides offer an object lesson in how jazz repertory

ought to be handled.

Already an experienced writer, during his eleven years with the band Foster mastered Basie's three keys to a successful arrangement – “simplicity, swing, and leaving spaces for the rhythm section. One of the main things he always said to me was, ‘Kid, swing that music.’ In other words, don't write too many complicated arrangements with all kinds of stuff going on everywhere. In that way he was almost as great an arranger as anybody out there, because he was a master at what to take out, what to leave out.”

The saxophonist's original compositions are showcased on *Easin' It: Music from the Pen of Frank Foster*, an overlooked gem of an album. Ingenious numbers like the title tune, “Blues for Daddy-O,” “Mama Dev Blues,” and a previously unreleased jewel from these sessions, “Discommotion,” with its brilliant trumpet choir effects, prove that there is no more gifted writer of big band blues charts than Frank Foster. The band is at its most modern-sounding on these tracks, but every one of them swings in the time-tested Basie manner.

Besides documenting the obvious influence that star sidemen like Foster, Wess, Grey, Newman, and Thad Jones had on the band's success, the Roulette recordings also reveal the indispensable contributions of three of Basie's unsung heroes. Baritone saxophonist Charlie Fowlkes anchors the sax section throughout, blows a warm solo on “Misty,” and blends his bass clarinet into reedy charts like Foster's “Rare Butterfly” and “It's About That Time.”

The light touch of bassist Eddie Jones steers the band through a steady course, laying down all the right notes in all the right places, and always in tune. His feature number, a jaunty walk through “Mama's Talking Soft” (arranged by Thad Jones), was a highlight of the *Not Now, I'll Tell You When* album, and, for that matter, of this entire collection.

But the motor of the Basie juggernaut was stalwart rhythm guitarist Freddie Green, chomp-chomp-chomp-chomping four beats to every measure like old Father Time himself. If quarter notes were quarters, Green, who joined Basie way back in early 1937 and never left, would have died a millionaire. Sometimes his juicy chords are more felt than heard, but occasionally they peek through the ensemble, as on three distinctive Thad Jones charts: “Easy Living” (the intro), “The Elder” (a chorus-long conversation with the full band), and “Bluish Grey” (the theme).

There's so much music here you'd think the band lived in the studio. (It didn't, of course – it lived on a bus.) Even after Basie left Roulette in 1962 the label had enough material in the can to maintain his presence among the its new release catalog for another three years. And some long buried treasures, like Foster's masterfully orchestrated “Miss Lovely,” trombonist Henry Coker's brisk, up-tempo ride through “The Song Is You” – a rare chance to display his marvelous chops (ending on a splendid high G) – and some typically first-rate Ernie Wilkins arrangements, have remained unreleased until now.

The sound throughout this set is generally fine, despite a small number of unavoidable ticks, dropouts, and peak distortions due to the age and condition of the masters. The only significant drawback of this otherwise superb reissue package is Chris Sheridan's liner notes, which consistently misidentify soloists. For example, commenting on the Roulette remake of Joe Williams' Clef hit, “Every Day I Have the Blues,” Sheridan observes that “the musical wit that clearly influenced Frank Foster is evident.” A nice point, except the tenor saxophone obbligato that he credits to Foster actually was played, on both

versions, by Frank Wess.

Similarly unfortunate is Sheridan's assertion that "the best trombonist to play with the band in the post-war period [was] Albert Thornton Grey." Certainly he's entitled to his opinion, although partisans of Benny Powell and Henry Coker (not to mention Quentin Jackson) might disagree. But Sheridan's notes misidentify so many trombone solos that, frankly, he has no credibility on this matter. He attributes Grey's two-chorus ride on "Half Moon Street" to Powell, perpetuating an error that Leonard Feather committed in his original liner notes to the *Chairman of the Board* back in 1959. Grey gets undue credit for Coker's rocking chorus on "Blues in Hoss' Flat." To complete the circle, Powell's fleet solo on "A Square at the Round Table" is ascribed incorrectly to Coker. And "Bag a' Bones," which Sheridan calls, "a robust vehicle for Al Grey," obviously features *all three* members of what was, arguably, the finest three-man trombone section of all-time. One can only wonder how many more such errors lie in wait, poised to strike unsuspecting listeners, disc jockeys, and reviewers.

There's no excuse for this sort of sloppiness, especially in a project as historically significant and expensive to purchase as this. Frankly, it's both disrespectful and unnecessary. Plenty of the principals were still on the planet at the time this set was being prepared, and a few quick phone calls or interviews – which is where the comments, included here, by Frank Foster, the late Al Grey, and Benny Powell came from – could have avoided this mess. So consumers who want to get it right either will have to do their own research or consult their local Basie-ite. (Special thanks to Benny Powell for helping to set the record straight on the solos.)

But none of this detracts from the music. A genuine *esprit de corps* pervades the entire set, the feeling that these musicians really loved the music and each other. "We had a band of brothers," Benny Powell confirms. "We were all very tight. We were like a family." And, by and large, this family that played together stayed together. After Lockjaw Davis split at the end of 1957, the unit remained largely intact with only one change (Sonny Cohn in for Wendell Culley) until January 1961, when Joe Williams decided to go out on his own. Then Joe Newman flew the coop, eventually replaced by the very fine trumpeter, Al Aarons.

Soon after, Al Grey and Billy Mitchell left to co-lead their own combo. Grey's chair was filled by another plunger master, former Ellingtonian Quentin "Butter" Jackson, whose feature tune here, "Bluish Grey" by Thad Jones, ironically bears his predecessor's name. Big band veteran Budd Johnson took over briefly for Mitchell, but by the end of the year Eric Dixon began his long and valuable tenure with Basie, handling tenor, flute, and clarinet chores, as well as some arranging. In early 1962 Snooky Young departed for the recording and TV studios, while the reliable bass man Eddie Jones embarked on a new and lucrative career in the then embryonic computer field. Still, nine of the fifteen sidemen from *E=MC²*, Basie's 1957 Roulette debut, were still with the band when he left the label five years later.

Once, while talking with Frank Foster, I mentioned that as a kid, first discovering and exploring this music, I thought that the Basie band of the 1950s and early 1960s was the definition of jazz. Foss, who left the band in 1964 but returned to serve as its musical director from 1986 to 1995, just grinned and replied, in his deep, Billy Eckstine speaking voice, "It *was* the definition of jazz." And these 175 invaluable tracks demonstrate why, for so many of us, this singular ensemble remains, for now and always, the definition of jazz.