

Illinois Jacquet:

Integrating Houston Jazz Audiences . . . Lands Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie in Jail

By Aimee L'Heureux

The integration of Houston jazz audiences followed a route of unexpected twists and turns that included the Catholic Church and the arrest of two jazz legends—singer Ella Fitzgerald and jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. The man behind this mayhem was Jean-Baptiste Illinois Jacquet, a tenor saxophonist from Houston, Texas.

Born in Broussard, Louisiana, in 1922, Jacquet moved to Houston's Sixth Ward with his family at six months old. His mother was a Sioux Indian, and his nickname, Illinois, came from the Indian word "Illiniwek," which means superior men.¹ Playing music ran in his family, with both his father and grandfather playing multiple instruments, and he counted his siblings among some of the many music teachers throughout his life. At age three, Illinois, one of six children, began tap dancing with his siblings for his father's band and later played drums in the Gilbert Jacquet band until he discovered his true love, the saxophone. Illinois Jacquet went to Phillis Wheatley High School in the Fifth Ward and could not wait to start playing in the marching band, which, like the football team, rivaled Jack Yates High School in the Third Ward.

Discussing his time in Houston during segregation, Jacquet recalled, "When I was here I didn't even know there was segregation in Houston until I would leave school or something and go downtown, and I'd see the signs because Phillis Wheatley was such a school [that] there was so much happening . . . they were winners in football team, basketball team, track. We had the best band at Phillis Wheatley, the better-looking girls, and they were light, just like white girls. They were black. They



Illinois Jacquet played an instrumental role in changing racial attitudes through jazz music, which Norman Granz called "the music of democratic America."

Photo courtesy of the William P. Gottlieb Collection, Library of Congress.



were all kinds. We didn't think about segregation at that time. We didn't realize that was really happening because we had such a great band, you know. . . ." As Jacquet grew older, he began noticing signs of segregation, but he maintained his focus on learning to play music and getting an education.²

By contrast, Catholicism, Jacquet explained, influenced integration of audiences and the jazz scene, both in Louisiana and Houston. In Louisiana, when bands would make their way through the state en route to New Orleans, Kansas City, or Texas, the Catholic churches would give them a place to stop and host dances. The Catholic Church, Jacquet said, "played a big role in jazz music, which probably had never been recorded in history." Jacquet attended St. Nicholas Catholic Church, a black congregation in the Third Ward, where Father Shepherd hosted similar dances on Sundays. Jacquet remembered the integrated audiences for the Sunday dances, "The white people want[ed] to come. They want[ed] to hear the music. There was no one going to stop them . . ." He reminisced, "And I grew up under that influence . . ."³

In the 1930s, Illinois Jacquet's Phillis Wheatley band was set to play the mezzanine at the Rice Hotel; however, because it was an African American band, the hotel instructed them to enter through the back door. Jacquet became the spokesman for

Elaine Clauder, though not allowed to go to the Houston show, received a signed photograph from Ella Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's signature is on the back of the photo, encased in matting, which would have damaged the photo if removed.

Photo courtesy of Elaine Van Horn.

the group and informed the band director that they would not play the gig unless they could come in through the front door like everyone else. Finally, the Rice Hotel agreed to the demand. Jacquet's comments about the incident were quoted in an article in the *Houston Press*: "If you don't say anything, nothing happens."⁴

Jacquet left Houston after high school to pursue his dream of playing music around the world. At age nineteen, during the first recording session of his career, his classic solo on "Flying Home" recorded with Lionel Hampton Band at Decca Records in New York City on May 26, 1942, produced a new sound and style for tenor saxophone. This solo boosted Jacquet to international fame and the solo became more famous than the song itself. Just two years later, jazz impresario Norman Granz produced a benefit on July 2, 1944, at the Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium in which Jacquet played for an integrated crowd. "I seem to excel on my instrument when I play for an integrated audience," he said. "When I look out there and it looks like polka dots and moonbeams, I play better. . . ." And he did indeed. While improvising with Nat King Cole on piano and Les Paul on guitar, Jacquet discovered what would become a permanent expansion of the upper register on the tenor saxophone. He contrasted these notes with sounds from the lowest notes on the horn and gave birth to "the honking tenor," which became the hallmark of rock and roll and greatly influenced rhythm and blues.⁵

Norman Granz believed in using jazz as a vehicle for social change to fight discrimination and segregation. He told Scottish radio and record producer Elliot Meadow in 1987: "I used jazz because I loved jazz." The first Jazz at the Philharmonic followed the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles where a series of brutal and bloody confrontations took place between Hispanic zoot suiters, police, and military during World War II. Granz used this concert to raise money to support the defendants in the Sleepy Lagoon Case, a trumped-up murder case involving twenty-two alleged gang members.⁶ Occasionally, Jazz at the Philharmonic raised funds to support the NAACP, and also to further the cause of anti-lynching legislation, which stalled in Congress in the 1940s.⁷

Witnessing how jazz had the potential to change racial attitudes, Jacquet told Granz that he would not play for a segregated audience in his hometown. "I didn't want to come to my hometown after playing all around the world without doing something," Jacquet explained. "I love Houston, Texas. . . . This is where I went to school. This is where I learned everything I know. I was just fed up with coming to Houston with a mixed cast on stage and playing to a segregated audience. I wanted Houston to see a hell of a concert, and they should see it like they were in Carnegie Hall. I felt if I didn't do anything about the segregation in my hometown, I would regret it. This was the time to do it. Segregation had to come to an end." And so Jazz at the Philharmonic featuring Illinois Jacquet, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Buddy Rich, and others,

scheduled their annual tour—stopping in Houston on October 5, 1955, to play Houston's Music Hall.⁸

Granz recalled: "I knew the story of Houston. It was one of the richest, if not the richest, city in America in terms of the oil that it has and what it represents. Usually a city that's very rich is a difficult city to break and change tradition. The people who run things, the rich whites, could come as strong as they wanted, and the police department would of course agree with that. Their point is 'Don't come here.' But I wanted to play one southern city where, being a rich city, we had a chance to sell out."⁹

In Dizzy Gillespie's out-of-print autobiography, *To Be, or not . . . to Bop*, Granz stated that when he rented the Music Hall, he added a non-segregation clause to the contract. Granz removed the racial signs denoting the "white" versus "black" restrooms, and refused to pre-sell tickets in case patrons attempted to section off parts of the venue for whites only. Maintaining his spokesman role, Illinois Jacquet discussed the reasons for not pre-selling tickets at Texas Southern University, local high schools, and on the radio. Granz and Jacquet intended for the gig to become the first major concert in Houston with a desegregated audience.¹⁰

Granz knew that with such a prominent line up, he could make some demands of Houstonians. "A lot of people never saw Ella, or they may have seen Ella but not a lot of the musicians. I got to the concert hall early, and somebody came up and wanted to change tickets because they were sitting next to a black. And I said, 'No, you can have your money back, but we're not going to change your seat.' (The customer took the money.) We did everything we could, and of course I had a

strong show. People wanted to see my show. If people wanna see your show, you can lay some conditions down."¹¹

Fearing problems from the audience because of the forced integration, Granz hired eight Houston Police Department officers as guards, including Lieutenant Sam Clauder, the driver for Mayor Roy Hofheinz. At the time, Sam Clauder's daughter was eighteen-years-old and wanted nothing more than to go see Ella Fitzgerald perform. Her father refused to let her go to the show for fear of the risk of violence from the crowd but promised he would bring her something to make it up to her. True to his word, when Clauder returned from work, he brought his daughter, Elaine Clauder (now Van Horn), a signed photograph of Ella Fitzgerald.¹²

Although no crowd disturbances or violence occurred that evening, for Ella Fitzgerald, her personal assistant Georgiana Henry, Dizzy Gillespie, and Illinois Jacquet, trouble was waiting in the wings. Houston's vice squad, headed by Sergeant W. A. Scotton, planned and operated a racially motivated sting mission to arrest the performers. Five officers in regular clothes obtained backstage access and burst into Ella Fitzgerald's dressing room with guns in hand. In the corner, Jacquet and Gillespie played craps, while Fitzgerald and Henry drank coffee in between sets.¹³

Elaine Clauder Van Horn recalled attending a Nat King Cole show at Club Matinee on Lyons Ave in the center of Fifth Ward. A large restaurant and club, it stayed open all night and brought in many big names. Her dad was friends with the owner, a black man, whose name escapes her. Elaine's parents went there occasionally to eat in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Club Matinee had a special room that the Clauders entered from the side parking lot, which was for "Whites." Elaine remembered that the restaurant/club had a nice large dance floor, but that whites could only watch the show; they could not enter the other area, dance on the dance floor, or mingle.

Granz recalled the incident in Gillespie's book stating that he heard the commotion, and when he came in, he saw a police officer headed to the bathroom, and immediately suspected he would plant drugs. Granz said to the officer, "I'm watching you," and the officer put his gun on Granz's stomach and said, "I oughta kill you."¹⁴

The vice squad made their arrests of Gillespie, Jacquet, Fitzgerald, Henry, and Granz for gambling. Granz told the manager of the Music Hall that the second set would have to be cancelled, which would likely cause the crowd to react unfavorably in an already tense situation. The vice squad brought the group to the police station, booked them, made them pay a fine, all the while asking for autographs. Reporters and photographers greeted the group at the station—suggesting the operation was indeed planned. The performers made it back to play the second set of the show, without the audience ever knowing what happened.¹⁵

Although that night was eventful, the Jazz at the Philharmonic concert did make way for more integrated audiences in Houston. In 1956, the concert returned, this time without Illinois Jacquet, and played to an audience of black and white with no police interference. "Houston is a hell of a city," Jacquet stated. "It's always been a hell of a city, but it had its habits, and segregation was one of those bad habits. I'm proud of what I did because I had no choice. If you're not going to do anything about it, then you don't care about where you came from. I wanted to do it for the younger people that were com-

ing up. Whatever I could do to improve our standards of life, I thought that was the appropriate thing to do, and it worked."¹⁶

Illinois Jacquet is said to have recorded over 300 original compositions, with many of these tunes conceived between 1945 and 1951. In 1983, Harvard University invited Jacquet to speak, and subsequently offered him a two semester Kayden Artist-in-Residence position—the only jazz musician to ever serve a long term residency there. His Harvard students encouraged him to form his professional big band in 1983, which performed all over the United States and Europe. His grammy-award nominated song, "Jacquet's Got It," was recorded with his band in 1987 for Atlantic Records. Illinois Jacquet and his band became the subject of Arthur Elgort's award-winning documentary, *Texas Tenor, The Illinois Jacquet Story*, released in 1991.¹⁷ Jacquet went on to play *C-Jam Blues* with former President Bill Clinton on the White House lawn during the 1993 inaugural ball. The Juilliard School of Music awarded Illinois an honorary Doctorate of Music degree on May 21, 2001. Illinois Jacquet died on July 22, 2004, of a heart attack, and the Illinois Jacquet Scholarship in Jazz Studies at The Juilliard School of Music was established to honor his memory.¹⁸ Jacquet will be remembered for his swinging improvisations, his screech and honk style, but Houstonians will likely remember him for his leadership role in desegregating jazz audiences in the Bayou City. 

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Reporters and photographers greeted the group upon their arrival at the police station—indicating that the operation was planned. From left to right: Ella Fitzgerald, Georgiana Henry, Illinois Jacquet, and Dizzy Gillespie.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

