

Texas Beginnings: Houston in the World of Jazz

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No Texas city can claim to be an incubator of jazz on the order of Chicago, Kansas City, Memphis, or, the sentimental favorite, New Orleans. Yet Texas bows to none in the production, if not always retention, of superior jazz artists. Teddy Wilson, Charlie Christian, Jack Teagarden, and Ernie Caceres rank among the legends of the industry, while only top-of-the-line talents could sustain names like "Cleanhead" Vinson, "T-Bone" Walker, and "Hot Lips" Page. A diversity of peoples and experiences melded in the vast expanses and urban areas of the state to provide a huge production stage. Southern tradition borrowed and reshaped Old World melodies through first-hand knowledge of slavery, poverty, military defeat, despair, hope, and religious fervor.¹

Houston, rapidly expanding in the early 1900s, possessed in microcosm those attributes of Texas and the South conducive to the new music. The Bayou City encompassed a multitude of ethnic musical strains and a black

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¹Useful general references on jazz include Leonard Feather, *The New Edition of the Encyclopedia of Jazz* (New York, 1960); Feather, *The Jazz Years: Eyewitness to an Era* (New York, 1987); Barry Ulanov, *A History of Jazz in America* (New York, 1964); James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (London, 1981); and Gunther Schuller, *The History of Jazz* (New York: 1968). This article is based primarily on interviews from the Texas Jazz Archive at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, and on interviews by the author.

Sammy Price's statement, "Jazz started wherever there were black people," summarized a common view of the interviewees. Samuel Price, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava, September 8, 1987, HMRC. None suggested Houston as a birthplace of jazz.

community dating from its origins. Houston jazz kept abreast of the national trends and, by most accounts, led the state. Ragtime, in the form of marching bands, strutted in at the turn of the century. Minstrels, medicine shows, and circuses plied the area, constantly updating the community's musical awareness. Dixieland, bolstered by phonograph records, had established itself by World War I. In the wake of the Great War, Houston had its quota of establishments peddling prohibited booze and the newly named jazz, as the barrel-house piano gave ground to the clarinet, trumpet, and, ultimately, the saxophone as featured instrument. When the big band swing era took root during the Depression, local ballrooms and stage productions approximated the sounds of Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, and Artie Shaw. If a local band carefully carved a niche, it could withstand the competition of nationally known groups, who routinely performed two-week stints in the years before jet transportation made one-nighters feasible. Houstonians could also tap their toes to radio broadcasts from the Empire Room or Aragon Ballroom. And just as local headliners trekked to the coasts to answer knocks of opportunity, incoming musicians left their tours to energize the Gulf Coast scene. Though known in the trade as something of a Friday and Saturday night town, Houston remained an important minor-league music center until World War II, when, in the words of a prominent bandleader: "Everything changed, and would never be the same."²

The First Generation

No consensus points to a specific founding father of Houston jazz. Early in the century, Giles Mitchell organized a band still remembered by admirers of his piano and alto saxophone. Russell and Percy McDavid's bands enriched the area, along with pianist Alphonse Anderson, trombonist Frank Gibbs, drummer Abner Jones, and violinist Anderson Lacy. Jones and Percy McDavid influenced later generations in their accompanying roles as music educators. A veteran musician said of McDavid, a graduate of the New York Conservatory of Music and band director at Wheatley High School: "He's the beginning of all jazz here."³

By the 1930s Wheatley, Yates, and Washington high schools showcased smart marching bands, whose members often formed jazz combos to earn pocket money around town. The training provided them an edge over many of the self-taught musicians who tested the job markets. Musicologist

²Conrad Johnson, interview by author, March 22, 1990; Carl Winters, interview by author, March 19, 1990; John Sullivan, interview by author, February 16, 1990 (quoted).

³Johnson interview; "Sonny Boy" Franklin, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava, June 17, 1975, HMRC (quoted).

Conrad Johnson, whose father directed the Yates band before him, remembered an age gap of about fifteen years separating the young, trained musicians from the older, self-taught ones in the same professional band.⁴

Schooled or unschooled, the aspiring craftsmen pursued their music with a determination to leave their mark. Samuel Price, consummate boogie-woogie pianist, divided his time among Houston, Dallas, and New York, en route to a national and international career. Born in 1908 in Honey Grove, in far northeastern Texas, Price enjoyed the distinction of studying piano with Booker T. Washington's daughter and the good fortune of having neighbors who allowed him to practice in their homes. His early skill exceeded his repertoire; for an audition the boy had mastered only "My Isle of Golden Dreams," which he dutifully rendered in waltz, foxtrot, and blues forms. At length the impatient manager ordered him "the hell out of here." Sammy Price entered Houston with Herschel Thomas's band in 1927 after a pioneering tour of Oklahoma with Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing in Walter Page's ground-breaking Blue Devils.⁵

Born two years after Price, Milton Larkin has remained a premier symbol of Houston jazz for most of the ensuing period. Hailing from Navasota, Larkin moved to the big city at age six with his widowed mother. Although his father had played the piano and his sister sang, Milton's love affair with music dated from a perusal of a magazine displaying pictures of musicians when he was about ten. The young man wangled a trumpet a few years later over the objections of a sister, who shared a popular view of musicians as disreputable drunks. He mastered the horn, played in the Wheatley band, and gained experience at "bus stops," a euphemism for the haunts that contributed to musicians' negative image. Influenced, like countless others, by Louis Armstrong, Larkin belted out "Sweet Sue," "Dinah," and "Dyin' Away" for appreciative audiences, but the national acclaim that he craved hovered beyond the horizon. Larkin took to the road in the mid-1930s to pursue the recognition due him.⁶

A contemporary of Price and Larkin, "Sonny Boy" Franklin stands with them among the first Houston jazzmen to carve a national reputation. While a student at Yates, Franklin attended concerts at Emancipation Park and the

⁴Johnson interview.

⁵Price interview; Feather, *New Edition*, 388. For information on the Blue Devils see Tim Schuller, "Granddad of Jazz," *D Magazine* 7 (November 1980): 191-200; and William W. Savage, Jr., "Jazz and the American Frontier Experience: Turner, Webb, and the Oklahoma City Blue Devils," *Journal of the West* 27 (July 1989): 32-35.

⁶Milton Larkin, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, January 5, 1988, HMRC; Feather, *New Edition*, 307.

Lincoln Theater. Abner Jones taught him the guitar, which he further studied at Wiley College, an institution boasting one of the finest bands in the South. Franklin then signed on with Larkin, traversing Texas, the South, and the Midwest.⁷

Conrad Johnson successfully combined an educational career with commercial jazz. The Victoria native witnessed his first jazz performance at a Houston minstrel show in 1924. Other childhood memories emanated from a crystal set which brought Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong into his bedroom. Preparatory to a 22-year tenure as band director at Houston's Kashmere High School, Johnson directed a school band near Marshall, worked on his own with drummer Jack Wilson, toured the Southwest in the 1940s, and cut records which remain big sellers in Europe and Japan. He recalls the between-wars Texas musicians as "good, but not a lot [in number]."⁸

Jazz singer and dancer Daisy Richards gravitated to music naturally through a father who taught music and performed jazz, a sister who played every instrument within reach, and the experience of spending her early childhood in New Orleans. She took up the piano as a young girl, mimicking the style of Eddie Duchin. When Daisy turned to dancing, she won a contest on the stage of the Majestic Theater at age fifteen. She began dancing on weekends and operated a department store elevator on weekdays. Her break came in 1939 when bandleader Jimmy Gibbons and comedian Troy Brown passed through Houston. Auditioning to "I'm Through With Love," she sang and danced her way into a tour of neighboring states which expanded into an illustrious career. Daisy Richards teamed with Billie Holliday, Count Basie, Louis Jordan, Lena Horne, Pearl Bailey, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Ink Spots. Between these engagements she appeared on television with Milton Berle and Ed Sullivan.⁹

I. H. Smalley, a native Houstonian, debuted as a saxophonist in the Antioch Baptist Church orchestra after a brother at Bishop College sent him the instrument. Smalley developed his style from idol Johnny Hodges and started working beer parlors with C. A. Dupree following the repeal of Prohibition. A combination of the gate and tips in those lean years could provide each member a princely sum of ten to eleven dollars. Smalley's circle of admirers spread to Beaumont, Wharton, El Campo, and even Austin and San Antonio, as he traveled the region. His band, which packed the local

⁷Franklin interview.

⁸Johnson interview.

⁹Daisy Richards, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, November 1, 1989, HMRC.

Eldorado Ballroom, featured Johnny Lee Brown, piano; Elvine MacIntosh, drums; Bob Haines, bass; Snooty Mills, trumpet; Vernon Banks, tenor sax; and Leftie Williams, singer.¹⁰

The legendary Arnett Cobb, born in Houston in 1918, attained a status among his contemporaries shared by few others. An only child, Arnett grew up among musical uncles and a grandmother who taught him the piano. Inspired by Ellington's recordings, Cobb attacked an assortment of instruments. He made his professional entry in 1933, two years before his high school graduation, with Frank Davis's band. Cobb moved to Chester Boone's organization while still at Wheatley and then connected with Larkin. Professionally, he never looked back after that.¹¹

Fellow saxophonist Illinois Jacquet, whom Cobb replaced in Lionel Hampton's band in 1942, also spent his formative years in Houston. Born in Broussard, Louisiana, in 1922, Jacquet and family moved to Houston within six months of his birth. A musical father who played bass in a railroad company band and an older brother, Robert, who later established himself at the Cotton Club in Hollywood, provided the inspiration for his career. In the late 1930s, while developing the touch which launched a new school of tenor sax stylists, Jacquet took to the road in the company of such talents as Lionel Proctor, Bob Cooper, and Milton Larkin.¹²

Opportunities at Home

Houston in the period between wars gained recognition as a regional hub in the world of jazz. A multitude of dance halls and clubs offered opportunities for musicians in all phases of their careers, from trainees to established artists. Many earned a living entirely from their music during the worst of the Great Depression, a feat rarely accomplished today. The night spots varied widely in size and accommodations, from the modest Blossom Heath to the luxurious Empire Room. And in Houston in the days of segregation, the venues often divided along racial lines.¹³

Racial separation in Houston and the South inhibited the mobility of the numerous black musicians, though less than it did for most occupations. The public demand for jazz, coupled with more toleration in the arts, allowed controlled crossings of the ancient color line. At a time when black Houstonians could not attend most movie houses, blacks often performed on their stages. The white Majestic and black Lincoln theaters constituted the

¹⁰I. H. Smalley, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava, June 9, 1975, HMRC.

¹¹Arnett Cobb, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, February 11, 1988; Feather, *New Edition*, 163; Ulanov, 199.

¹²Feather, *New Edition*, 266; Ulanov, 285; *New York Times*, June 26, 1988.

¹³Johnson interview; Sullivan interview.

most promising outlets for this work in Houston. While the absence of a black union local precluded opportunities requiring membership, the Theatrical Order of Bookers Association offered showcases for black talent throughout the South. Severe restrictions, however, frequently complicated hotel and travel arrangements. In Atlanta, for example, police required a black musician on the streets after midnight to produce a letter from the theater manager verifying his employment. In Houston, where there were fewer barriers, blacks performing at white functions still routinely found themselves restricted to the dressing rooms between acts, and expected to avoid the lobbies when entering or leaving. Black clubs provided an atmosphere free from racial tensions for black jazz artists, and they counted among their local mainstays the Eldorado, the Harlem Grill, and the Pilgrim Auditorium.¹⁴

Whites and blacks appreciated each others' skills despite the legal sanctions, and musicians and fans attended events of the other race when rules permitted. Integrated bands, a rarity at this time, performed at the Texas Centennial in Dallas to the enjoyment of thousands. Conrad Johnson worked with Herb Long's all-white group at Denison in the early 1940s without incident, forming fast friendships with the musicians. A white Houston musician recalled never hesitating to enter a black establishment. The halting movement toward racial toleration clearly antedated that in other societal spheres and approximated conditions elsewhere in the music world. Texan Teddy Wilson attracted national attention in 1935 when he toured with Benny Goodman.¹⁵

Houston's white bandleaders definitely had more opportunities to perform. In the silent screen era, pit orchestras at the Majestic, Metropolitan, Lowe's, Queen, and Texan theaters enjoyed steady work. After movies learned to talk, country clubs and dance halls such as End of Main, Kensington, and Aragon took up the slack. John Sullivan, who with his brother Ed assembled a band in 1935, recalled that virtually every hotel held dances and the Rice boasted three at a time. Record companies were seldom an outlet for local talent, since the small number of established firms recording jazz were far away from Houston. Radio broadcasts widened the circle of fans, however,

¹⁴Price interview; Richards interview; Franklin interview. A local black union organized in 1950 and merged with the white A.F.M. local in 1965. Some blacks held membership in other cities before union membership was available in Houston. Leonard D. Carnagey, interview by Charles Stephenson and Louis J. Marchiafava, March 2, 1989, HMRC.

¹⁵Ed Gerlach, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, October 18, 1989, HMRC; Johnson interview; Sullivan interview; *Austin American-Statesman*, August 7, 1986; *New York Times*, March 1, 1985.

placing outlying sites like Galveston and Sylvan Beach well within their itinerary.¹⁶

Like Sullivan, Ed Gerlach assembled a large band initially, dubbing his sixteen-piece organization "The Houstonians." Armed with musical arrangements acquired from "Wild Bill" Davis, a guitarist with Larkin, the Livingston native broke off his college career to tour the state in 1938. His action represented a growing trend among young enthusiasts in the Depression decade to emulate the swing of Miller, Goodman, and the Dorseys. Large bands, offering a varied repertoire and polished performances, dominated the more prestigious hotels and theater shows, while the ensembles worked smaller rooms such as Luna Park and Rendezvous. Nevertheless, purists considered the smaller groups the true exponents of jazz. In fact, the big bands often incorporated a jazz combo within the larger structure. Some big band leaders, such as Gerlach, later formed small jazz groups. Other big band musicians joined in after-hours jam sessions to satiate their passion for jazz, but increasingly musicians crossed back and forth between large and small units, and improvisation and arrangement merged.¹⁷

Pianist Peck Kelley, whose insistence on privacy rivaled Greta Garbo, rejected the opportunities sought by his colleagues. Notorious for his dislike of travel, recording, or rehearsal, Kelley received unsolicited publicity from a national magazine article which touted him as an originator of boogie-woogie. Kelley turned down employment offers from Paul Whiteman and Jimmy Dorsey and refused to go to New York to appear on a network program or even to allow a broadcast from the Southern Club, where he performed locally. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Kelley played out his career in Houston, performing where and what he liked, drawing adulation from a devoted circle of insiders throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁸

Wartime Changes

World War II drew the shade on the big band era. Personnel and fuel shortages after Pearl Harbor curtailed activities and favorable conditions failed to return with the peace. A decline of clubs, fewer radio stations willing to dispense air time, escalating costs of operations, and, eventually, television and rock-and-roll contributed to the eclipse of the swing bands.¹⁹

For individual jazz musicians and small bands, the war provided a

¹⁶Sullivan interview.

¹⁷Gerlach interview; Sullivan interview; Johnson interview.

¹⁸Sullivan interview.

¹⁹Sullivan interview; *Riding Line*, March 1973.

transition period. Many of the established local stars moved on to enjoy a greater demand enhanced by new prosperity in the big population centers. Sammy Price, who had settled in New York City in 1938, worked steadily at recording sessions, solo appearances, and Broadway plays. In the early 1940s he organized the "Texas Bluesicians," which included premier tenor saxophonist Lester Young. Milton Larkin, who had recruited the likes of Eddie Vinson, Illinois Jacquet, "Wild Bill" Davis, and Arnett Cobb to Chicago in the late 1930s, performed in New York at the Apollo with Ella Fitzgerald and at the Empire Room with Dizzy Gillespie. He entered the army in 1943, took up the trombone, and returned to Manhattan after the war. Daisy Richards departed Houston in 1942 with Jimmy Gibbons and traveled the Midwest. At the end of the war she moved east, dancing, doing comedy, and, for a time, tending bar at Sugar Ray's in New York. A near-fatal auto accident in 1945 broke her neck, but not her spirit. After fourteen months of therapy, Richards returned to Texas.²⁰

The successes of Arnett Cobb and Illinois Jacquet took them away from Houston. Arnett joined Lionel Hampton in Chicago in 1942 and, five years later, established his own band. Cobb pressed ahead despite a series of operations for spinal problems stemming from his being hit by a car at the age of ten. After a serious car accident in 1956, he came back to Houston, where he managed several clubs, assembled a sixteen-piece band, and performed with an aspiring young bass player named Kenny Rogers. Jacquet moved to the west coast in 1941 with Floyd Ray, subsequently signing with vibraphonist Hampton's new organization. Their now classic recording of "Flying Home" fashioned an innovative saxophone style and brought instant acclaim to both Hampton and Jacquet. Illinois appeared with Cab Calloway and Count Basie before forming his own band and touring with "Jazz at the Philharmonic" units.²¹

World War II intervened in the careers of some performers just as they were poised for success. Conrad Johnson graduated from Wiley College the same year the United States went to war. He continued to work North Texas and the Southwest for most of the war years and returned to Houston in 1945. Recently married, Johnson entered teaching and also enhanced a still lively music scene by taking his jazz group into Eldorado, Club Matinee, and the Cinder Club. John Sullivan, who had parlayed a Christmas-gift trumpet into a locally successful career during the 1930s, had performed in the Houston Symphony Orchestra, led the house band at the Sylvan Beach Ballroom, and set an attendance record at the Plantation by the end of the

²⁰Price interview; Feather, *New Edition*, 307, 388; Larkin interview; Richards interview.

²¹Cobb interview; Feather, *New Edition*, 163, 242, 266.

decade. In 1940 Sullivan judged his band ready to enter national competition; he booked engagements in major cities and contracted with three radio networks. The Japanese attack on Honolulu chilled the propitious beginning, as Sullivan received a draft greeting and disbanded his orchestra. He returned to Houston in 1945, alternately working for himself, Tony Di Pardo, Tony Martin, Henry King, and Al Marks.²²

Still, the Houston scene was far from idle during the war years. Some musicians, like Ed Gerlach, remained in spite of other intentions. With the outbreak of war, Gerlach and his entire band enlisted in the air corps at Ellington Field, contemplating combat in distant theaters. As it turned out, the training site just outside Houston was the farthest they got from home for two years. While stationed here, Gerlach performed at the base and at the Rice Hotel. After assignment to Virginia, he frequently took leave in New York, attending the sessions of Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, and Billy Eckstine along 52nd Street. After his wartime travels, Gerlach set up shop at the Log Cabin on the Old Galveston Highway, taught the history of jazz at the University of Houston, and toured and recorded with Tex Beneke before settling in as house band leader at the Shamrock Hotel. "Sonny Boy" Franklin and I. H. Smalley remained in the city which launched their careers. Franklin performed at the Aragon Ballroom, Loma Linda Club, and Rice Hotel, with broadcasts on KTRH and KPRC. Smalley continued as a featured performer at the Eldorado. He recalled that clubs of the period often hosted Sunday cocktail parties until the police raided them for not carrying a liquor license.²³

The Postwar Generation

In the meantime new Houston talent mingled with the established veterans. Local product Jimmy Ford, born in 1927 and raised by his grandparents, wanted a motorized mini-bike for his twelfth birthday. Luckily for music buffs, he received a saxophone instead. Jimmy added to his musical arsenal with clarinet lessons from Tony Russo, president of the musicians' union. Smitten with the glamour of a jazz career after attending performances at the Metropolitan Theater and City Auditorium, Ford turned to the art form at age seventeen. He journeyed to the Midwest, broadcasting nightly from Dayton, Ohio, and joined the Navy late in the war. Returning to civilian life a few months later, Ford toured with Johnny

²²Johnson interview; Sullivan interview; "John Sullivan, His Trumpet and Orchestra," resume, Houston (n.d.). Sullivan had a long and rewarding collaboration with jazz trumpeter Ed Lavin and tenor saxophonist Lee Davis. Sullivan to author, February 15, 1990.

²³Gerlach interview; Franklin interview; Smalley interview.

"Scat" Davis and Billie Schuttze, dividing the remainder of the decade among Houston, New York, and California. A music critic appraised the young man as "an erratic but potentially brilliant musician, one of the most fluent of modern [Charlie] Parker counterparts."²⁴

While David "Fathead" Newman of Dallas and Florence Pleasant of Corpus Christi were forging a name for Texas jazz in postwar America, native Houstonian Jewel Brown turned down an opportunity to tour Europe with Lionel Hampton after her graduation from high school. Born in 1937, Jewel debuted as a singer at age nine in the local Masonic temple. Attracting a following at talent shows, she discovered that audiences would eagerly pay to watch her. She entertained widely along the Gulf Coast as a teenager at Galveston, Wharton, Columbus, Anahuac, and in Houston at the Whispering Pines, Bar-B Ranch, Wango Lounge, Ebony Club, and the perennial Eldorado. In Dallas she worked at Jack Ruby's Sovereign Club. Jewel broke with the future assassin of Lee Harvey Oswald when he angered her by demanding half of a \$100 tip. Brown's fame overcame a local racial barrier when an exclusive Houston hotel contracted with her after refusing to book Nat Cole. She later appeared with Earl Grant and Louis Armstrong. Perhaps reconsidering her earlier rejection of a European tour, Jewel Brown toured the globe four times in a period of nine years.²⁵

Houstonian Wilton Felder wasn't born until the end of the first jazz era in 1940, but he began entertaining as a junior high school student early in the following decade when a brother awarded Wilton a saxophone for recovering from pneumonia. By 1959 Felder, the youngest of ten children, had traveled with friends to California to perform and record as "The Nighthawks." Like many in the previous musical generation, Wilton had exploited all local opportunities, working the Eldorado, Matinee, and Tropicana, before taking the leap.²⁶

Billy Harper, a local boy born in 1943, grew up in a musical, religious family and, like Felder, played saxophone at school. Harper matriculated at

²⁴Jimmy Ford, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, September 28, 1988, HMRC; Feather, *New Edition*, 217 (quoted).

²⁵David Newman, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, August 26, 1989, HMRC; Florence Pleasant, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava, August 14, 1988, HMRC; Jewel Brown, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, October 3, 1988, HMRC.

²⁶Wilton Felder, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava and Charles Stephenson, August 25, 1989, HMRC. Felder received an eerie footnote in the Patty Hearst kidnapping when the Symbionese Liberation Army played his recording "Way Back Home" as background music to the telephone ransom demands.

North Texas State, renowned for its music department. The location, Denton, placed the Houstonian in close proximity to "Fathead" Newman, Dewey Redman, and Julius Hemphill, with whom he collaborated. While in graduate school, Harper succumbed to the siren call of New York, driving on an expiring credit card to the east coast. His introduction to the Big Apple consisted of having his bags stolen from his car. Fortunately, he was carrying his prized saxophone at the time. The young musician and composer guarded the instrument closely after that. He worked with Gil Evans and Art Blakey prior to organizing his own quartet.²⁷

Another local, Clayton Dyess, was born in 1953—in the decade that saw numerous careers decline in the competition with television and rock-and-roll. With the number of jazz clubs diminished and big bands in full retreat, youthful Clayton discovered several boxes of old jazz recordings in a dumpster. This treasure inspired him to take up singing and playing the piano and guitar. The self-taught entertainer signed on with blues singer James Bolden while still a teenager. The generations came full circle as Dyess appeared on stage with masters Jimmy Ford, Milton Larkin, and Arnett Cobb during recent years.²⁸

An Ongoing Tradition

Jazz held on in Houston despite changing musical trends in the 1960s and 1970s, even showing signs of rejuvenation with the development of Market Square as a jazz center and the inauguration of jazz festivals in the Astrodome. The former scheme, fueled by the enactment of liquor-by-the-drink, failed when downtown clubs became too expensive and reports of crime chased cautious customers back to their television sets. Jazz devotees complained of increased commercialization at the Astrodome events, and attendance declined.²⁹

Other promising trends have persisted. The dedication of numerous school band directors and the summer workshops of Conrad Johnson and Bubbha Thomas have spawned a new generation of fans and performers. The Jazz Heritage Society of Texas recorded an album at the Wortham Theater Center, featuring Cobb, Brown, Price, and other local giants commemorating "75 Years of Texas Jazz." The Houston Public Library's Houston Metropolitan Research Center houses the Texas Jazz Archive, an ambitious undertaking that gathers oral, written, and photographic materials

²⁷Billy Harper, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava, August 27, 1989, HMRC.

²⁸Clayton Dyess, interview by Louis J. Marchiafava, September 9, 1988, HMRC.

²⁹Sullivan interview; Johnson interview; Winters interview.

on local and regional artists. KTSU, Houston's most jazz-oriented radio station, ranked seventeenth among the area's forty-two outlets in a recent listeners' survey, a source of great pride to Fred Pendergrass, the station's development executive. The entire music community takes pride in the success of local players in this new generation, such as saxophonist Kirk Whalum, a protégé of Cobb and one of the latest products of the Houston music scene. Yet, like many in that tradition, Whalum no longer makes his home here.³⁰

Some performers have remained and prospered in the coastal area. With fewer venues and stiffer competition, the new breed of jazzman is smart, tough, and trained. He eyes copyrights and contracts more closely than many of his mentors and realizes the value of marketing, public relations, and a thoroughly professional attitude. He plays to his audiences, rather than for himself, and hesitates giving up that supporting day job. Scott Gertner exemplifies the most successful of the new wave. Originally from Passaic, New Jersey, Gertner moved to Houston at age six, already devoted to the guitar. Always interested in a music career, Gertner landed his first club job with pianist Paul English, whose band also included Whalum. In early 1980 Gertner formed his own quartet, now a sextet, and charted a direct route to the top. In such demand that his band can work every calendar day if it chooses, the young man has cut his second album and played in traditional entertainment venues such as Las Vegas. His financial condition secure, Gertner spurns suggestions of relocating elsewhere.³¹

Instant communication and transportation now enable devoted Houstonians to attain national recognition without leaving their base of operations. This raises the hope that Houston might yet become a major league jazz center, rather than an attractive minor league franchise. In any case, the durability of the product is proven. Despite competition from television, local and touring rock bands, limited radio play, videos, discotheques, and a recently sluggish economy, Houston jazz today maintains the tenacity of its forebears. "They can't kill jazz," Conrad Johnson stated softly, while plaques, photographs, and posters representing a lifetime of dedication to the art form looked down from the walls of his den. Thoughtful for a moment, as though mentally testing the possibility, he smiled broadly and confidently: "They can't kill it."³²

³⁰Johnson interview; Houston *Chronicle*, September 5, 1988; Fred Pendergrass, interview by author, February 28, 1990; Austin *American-Statesman*, December 10, 1985.

³¹Carnagey interview; Winters interview; Scott Gertner, interview by author, May 1, 1990.

³²Johnson interview.