

Bayou City Jazz Greats

By Andrew Vodinh

Music has always been a part of my life. In high school, I joined the jazz band, blindly playing music on the guitar and clarinet without knowing much about the artists, their background, or their contributions. Eventually, though, I became curious about jazz's origins and the influence of Houston's jazz artists on the genre and was surprised to learn that many of them got their first breaks in the industry as high school musicians.

A musical genre played by individuals and bands at all levels, jazz originated at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States in southern black communities. The use of blue notes, conflicting rhythms, improvisation, rhythmic stresses, and the swing note combine to define jazz. In the 1920s, it blossomed in cities such as Chicago, Kansas City, Memphis, and New Orleans, causing the period to be dubbed the "Jazz Age." No city in Texas can claim to be a founder of jazz; nevertheless, Texas produced superior jazz artists, including Aaron Thibeaux "T-Bone" Walker from Linden and Oran Thaddeus "Hot Lips" Page from Dallas.¹ The Houston area flourished with phenomenal players like Milton Larkin, Arnett Cobb, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Illinois Jacquet, Hubert Laws, and Huey Long who contributed to jazz music's rich history.



THE ORIGINAL INK SPOTS 1945

Long after the Ink Spots with Houstonian Huey Long (bottom left) disbanded, the group's music and influence on popular culture lives on in the Martin Scorsese film Raging Bull, "The Day the Earth Looked Stupid" on The Simpsons, and the opening of Megadeath's song, "Set the World Afire." Photo courtesy of Anita Long, Ink Spots Museum.

Houston's jazz scene kept up with national trends and led the state with its development. Sounds of the newly emerging jazz styles featuring the clarinet, trumpet, and saxophone with the piano could be heard coming from several local establishments.² From the honking tenor saxophone of Illinois Jacquet to Huey Long's improvisational Dixieland guitar style, Houston's innovative musicians influenced the jazz we hear today at universities, night clubs, and concert halls.

MILTON LARKIN OF THE MILT LARKIN ALLSTARS

Many jazz musicians recognize Milton Larkin as an originator of Houston jazz during its developmental era because he brought together many of the city's best talents who became top-of-the-line artists.

Born October 10, 1910, in Navasota, Texas, Larkin and his mother moved to Houston after his father died when Larkin was six years old. He fell in love with music at the age of ten, learning about musicians through magazine images. Mostly self-taught, he started playing the trumpet at sixteen and mastered the instrument while playing in the Phillis Wheatley High School band. An all-black school, Wheatley showcased its marching band that included many students who played jazz around town to earn money. Larkin and other band members gained experience playing at bus stops, which contributed to the negative image of musicians.³

In 1936, Larkin started his own band, which included



Band leader Milton Larkin, considered a father of Houston jazz, gathered many of the city's best musicians to play in his orchestra. Larkin is featured in a PBS documentary, *The Bigfoot Swing*. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson, Arnett Cobb, and Illinois Jacquet, with whom he toured around the southwest United States. They gained recognition, although they never recorded together and the opportunity helped lay the foundation for their future success. Larkin disbanded the group upon entering the army during World War II. After the war, he recorded with multiple ensembles, playing the trumpet and the trombone, which he took up during his military service.

In the 1970s, Larkin moved back to Houston, where he performed for physically handicapped children, mentally ill patients, and elderly audiences, later receiving the Jefferson Award for community service.⁴ When he died in 1996, musicians, politicians, and members of the press came to his funeral to pay their respects and acknowledge his contributions to Houston and jazz.

ARNETT CLEOPHUS COBB, WILD MAN OF THE TENOR SAX

A member of Larkin’s 1936 orchestra, Arnett Cobb was born on August 10, 1918, in Houston’s Fifth Ward. Cobb discovered music at an early age and played a range of instruments including the piano and the violin, but he switched to the saxophone after joining the eighty-piece brass band at Wheatley High School. Wheatley and Jack Yates High School competed against each other in music and football, and the competition motivated musicians like Cobb and Vinson to become the best.

Cobb, known as the “Wild Man of the Tenor Sax,” made his professional debut in 1933 with Vinson in Frank Davis’s band. Cobb later played under trumpeter Chester Boone with Vinson until 1936 when he met Milton Larkin. After



Arnett Cobb and His Orchestra featured Cobb on the tenor sax. Cobb was especially known for “Smooth Sailing,” which Ella Fitzgerald recorded. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



Like Milton Larkin and Arnett Cobb, saxophonist Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson had his own orchestra. In 1947, he had a double-sided hit for Mercury Records with “Old Maid Boogey” and “Kidney Stew Blues.”

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

traveling with Larkin’s band, Cobb replaced Illinois Jacquet in Lionel Hampton’s band in 1942. He toured with Hampton until 1947 when he formed his own seven-piece band. Cobb suffered spinal problems as a result of a childhood car accident that hampered his new-found success. Unfortunately a later car accident required him to have spinal surgery. Despite permanently relying on crutches, he continued his musical productions as a jazz soloist in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵

Cobb impacted jazz music on several different levels. He described his band’s style as “straight-ahead jazz with melody in it with a Texas quality.” Cobb’s individual style with the tenor saxophone helped maintain the special quality of historic jazz and is recognized by today’s jazz audiences as the “Texas Sound.” One of his last contributions insures the history of jazz will be preserved for future generations—the creation of the Texas Jazz Heritage Society, which established the Texas Jazz Archive in cooperation with the Houston Metropolitan Research Center at the Houston Public Library.⁶

EDDIE “CLEANHEAD” VINSON

Born in Houston on December 18, 1917, Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson took up the alto saxophone as a child and his talent gained recognition from local bandleaders. Vinson debuted with Cobb in Frank Davis’s band and toured regionally with him under Chester Boone during school holidays while attending Yates High School.

After graduating in 1935, Vinson joined the band full-time. A year later, he became part of Milton Larkin’s band where he met other prominent jazz artists including Aaron “T-Bone” Walker. The band’s touring schedule exposed

Vinson to musicians like “Big” Bill Broonzy, who taught him to shout the blues, and Charlie “Bird” Parker, who taught him alto saxophone technique. In late 1941, Vinson joined trumpeter Duke Ellington’s new orchestra in New York City where he made his recording debut for OKeh Records. Vinson also recorded under Hit Records and Capitol Records with American jazz trumpeter Charles “Cootie” Williams’s orchestra.

In late 1945, Vinson formed his own big band, recording small-group bop and blasting band instruments for Mercury Records. His main output, however, consisted of suggestive jump-blues sung in his unique Texas style. Maintaining his style, Vinson began recording for King Records in 1948, often with all-star jazz elements and toured with King’s jazz subsidiary, Bethlehem Records.

Vinson returned to Houston and retired in 1957. In 1961, fellow alto saxophonist “Cannonball” Adderley rediscovered Vinson and enlisted him to record with the Adderley brothers’ band at Riverside Records. Demonstrating the popularity of his Texas style, Vinson found full-time employment at worldwide jazz and blues festivals until his death in Los Angeles, California, on July 2, 1988.⁷

ILLINOIS JACQUET, PIONEER OF THE HONKING TENOR

Another big name in the Houston jazz scene was that of saxophonist Illinois Jacquet. He was born on October 31, 1922, in Broussard, Louisiana, but his family moved to Houston’s Sixth Ward when he was six months old. Both his jazz and cultural roots grew out of Houston. Playing music ran in the Jacquet family, including his father, Gilbert Jacquet,



Illinois Jacquet revolutionized jazz and rock and roll music with his “honking tenor” style of play. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

who played bass in a railroad company band. At the age of three, Jacquet and his five siblings began tap dancing for his father’s band. He later played drums in the band until he discovered his true passion, the saxophone. Like fellow artists Larkin and Cobb, Jacquet went to Wheatley High School and could not wait to start playing saxophone in the high school’s marching band. In the late 1930s, Jacquet began traveling with artists such as Lionel Proctor, Bob Cooper, and Milton Larkin. After leaving Houston to pursue his dream of touring professionally, Jacquet produced a new sound and style for the tenor saxophone through his classic solo on “Flying Home” recorded with the Lionel Hampton Band on May 26, 1942. Jacquet contrasted the upper register on the tenor saxophone with the lowest notes on the horn giving birth to “the honking tenor,” now a regular feature of jazz music and a trademark of early rock and roll.⁸

In addition to his musical contributions, Jacquet played an important role in integrating Houston jazz audiences at the Music Hall on October 5, 1955, during the annual “Jazz at the Philharmonic” tour featuring Jacquet, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Buddy Rich, and others. With his roots in Houston, Jacquet wanted the city to see “a hell of a concert.” Being accustomed to playing to integrated audiences, Jacquet also wanted to do something to improve the living standards for young black Houstonians and knew that he would regret it if he failed to take a stand against segregation in his hometown. With jazz producer Norman Granz’s addition of a non-segregation clause in the show’s contract and Jacquet’s marketing, they paved the way for future integrated concerts in Houston.⁹

Jacquet’s legacies demonstrate his commitment to improving conditions for young people. In 1993, he served two semesters as a Kayden Artist-in-Residence at Harvard. On May 21, 2001, The Juilliard School of Music awarded Jacquet an honorary Doctorate of Music degree. To honor Jacquet’s passion for jazz education, his daughter, Dr. Pamela Jacquet-Davis, his granddaughter, and his manager founded the Illinois Jacquet Foundation (IJF). The IJF collaborated with Juilliard in creating the Illinois Jacquet Scholarship in Jazz Studies given to an individual pursuing a musical career with a concentration in jazz. Although Jacquet passed away on July 22, 2004, his legacy continues through his honking tenor style and his role in desegregation and music education.¹⁰

HUBERT LAWS, RENOWNED JAZZ FLUTIST

Hubert Laws was born in Houston, Texas, on November 10, 1939. The second of eight children in a musical family, he grew up playing rhythm and blues and gospel at neighborhood dances. He started out on piano, switching to mellophone and later to the alto saxophone. In high school, he picked up the flute after volunteering to fill in on a flute solo with his high school orchestra. Wheatley High School band director Sammy Harris exposed Laws to jazz, and he enjoyed the freedom of improvisation and creativity the genre offered.¹¹

Laws attended Texas Southern University for two years before leaving for Los Angeles with the Modern Jazz Sextet, now known as the Jazz Crusaders. After a few years in California, he won a one-year scholarship to attend The



Houston’s Hubert Laws has become one of the most renowned jazz flutists of all time, playing with the New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

Photo courtesy of wikicommons.

Julliard School of Music. He spent the next thirty-one years in New York playing with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra as well as the New York Philharmonic. Laws recorded his first album for Atlantic Records in 1964 before subsequently going to CTI Records and then Columbia Records.¹²

Philosophically, Laws believes that today's musicians would do well to learn to play in an assortment of musical idioms.¹³ He continues to entertain audiences, performing in both orchestras and his personal band. Alongside Herbie Mann, Laws remains one of the most well-known and appreciated jazz flutists.

HUEY LONG OF THE INK SPOTS

Although born on April 25, 1904, just west of Houston in Sealy, Texas, Huey Long had his roots in the city. He worked various jobs in the Houston area until the opportunity struck to play banjo in Frank Davis's Louisiana Jazz Band in 1925. The band became known as the "Dixielanders," a term for musicians playing Dixieland music, otherwise known as "hot jazz" or "early jazz." The band migrated to Chicago where Long appeared at the 1933 World's Fair, "A Century of Progress," with Texas Guinan's Cuban Orchestra. At that point, Long gave up the banjo and started to play the guitar.

In 1942, Long joined Fletcher Henderson's band and moved to New York. In 1944, he formed his own trio with C. C. Williams on the piano and Eddie Brown on the bass. Around this same time, the vocal group the Ink Spots had begun to define the musical genre leading to rhythm and blues and rock and roll. Lead singer Bill Kenny talked Huey Long into giving up his trio to temporarily become an Ink Spot. Long joined the group at the peak of its success, providing guitar accompaniment and vocal support and recording several songs, including "I'm Gonna Turn Off the Teardrops," "Just For Me," and "The Sweetest Dream." He stayed with the group until their guitarist Charlie Fuqua returned from the army in October 1945. In the 1950s, Long continued touring the United States with his own trio before moving to California to pursue music education at Los Angeles City College. He later returned to New York where he formed his own group of the "Ink Spots," taking them to California.

Later, Long again returned to New York where he taught and wrote music. After writing and arranging more than eighty songs for his chord melody guitar style, he moved back to his roots in Houston, where his daughter, Anita Long, developed a display of his history, memorabilia, and songs, which can be found at the Ink Spots Museum. Although Long is mainly known for his contributions to the Dixieland guitar style, the chordal progression on a banjo allowed him to improvise with multiple notes rather than a single note by moving chords up and down the frets. With his experience on the banjo, he approached the guitar similarly, improving his guitar solos and improvisations.¹⁴ Huey Long passed away on June 10, 2009, at the age of 105; however, his improvisational playing style on both the banjo and guitar continues to live on in jazz and other musical genres.



Huey Long gave up the banjo for the guitar after migrating to Chicago and appearing at the World's Fair, "A Century of Progress," with Texas Guinan's Cuban Orchestra. He signed this photo of himself for his mother in 1933.

Photo courtesy of Anita Long, Ink Spots Museum.

HOUSTON'S JAZZ LEGACY TODAY

Jazz has held its ground in Houston despite changing musical trends in the 1960s and 1970s. The former jazz scene associated with bars failed when downtown clubs became too expensive and customers remained at home due to reports of high crime rates. Nevertheless, jazz music remains popular today as evidence by the dedication of numerous school band directors and school jazz bands, as well as summer workshops creating a new generation of fans and performers.

The Jazz Heritage Society of Texas, created by Arnett Cobb, recorded an album at the Wortham Theater Center commemorating "75 Years of Texas Jazz."¹⁵ The Texas Jazz Archive was established by the Jazz Heritage Society of Texas, which gathers oral, written, and photographic materials on local and regional jazz artists. With the innumerable contributions of Houston jazz artists and the efforts of jazz fanatics today, jazz continues to resonate with Houstonians.¹⁶

Andrew Vodinh was born and raised in Houston. He attended the Awty International School where he participated in multiple extracurricular activities, including wind ensemble and jazz band. A student in the University of Houston's Honors College, Andrew is currently pursuing a degree in chemical engineering.