The Wisconsin-Texas Jazz Nexus

Dave Oliphant

As jazz critic Gunther Schuller has commented, it is surprising to discover the “diverse regions of the country” from which jazz musicians have hailed.1 It is especially surprising that such musicians, with differing geographical, political, social, religious, ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds, have been able to come together to perform a music that requires a very particular spirit, peculiar technical skills, and a sensitivity to and an appreciation for musical forms and traditions that owe their origins to conditions rarely endured by the musicians themselves. Few, if any, of the first black jazzmen, and certainly none of the early white jazzmen, had ever known the often inhuman servitude borne by those who sang the chants, spirituals, and blues that would form the basis of jazz from its beginnings right up to the present time.

The institution of slavery had, of course, divided the nation, and on opposite sides in the Civil War were the states of Wisconsin and Texas, both of which sent troops into the bloody, decisive battle of Gettysburg. Little could the brave men of the Wisconsin6 who defended or the determined Rebels of the Texas Regiments who assaulted Cemetery Ridge have suspected that, one day, musicians of their two states would join to produce the harmonies of jazz that have depended so often on the blues form that was native to the Lone Star State yet was loved and played by men from such Wisconsin towns and cities as Fox Lake, Madison, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Brillton, Monroe, and Kenosha.2 Around the world, jazz has proven a force for the meeting of minds and the free exchange of musical ideas, whether through melancholy and fast-paced blues or the swinging, bopping, driving rhythms that have appealed to players and listeners in every corner of this country and those perhaps in every nation on earth.

By defeating the South in the Civil War, Wisconsin and the other Union states helped make possible in many ways the rise of blues, ragtime, and boogie woogie, forms of black music whose origins have been traced in part to the migration of freed slaves to Texas. The railroad lines in East Texas provided employment for men who had been able to do little more than labor away relentlessly as sharecroppers on the same southern lands where they essentially remained in bondage during the postwar Reconstruction. As Texas folklore scholar Alan Lomax has pointed out, more American music has referred to or been related to the railroad than any other form of musical inspiration.3 Certainly the railroad as a source of sound and sorrow is at the root of blues rhythms and lyrics and the chugging, swaying patterns of boogie woogie, as well as such a sophisticated jazz composition as Duke Ellington’s “Daybreak Express.” Songsters with their constant reference to a honey or mamma going away or a singer’s need to leave in the face of lost love are standard blues fare.

However, more important to the emergence of jazz was the fact that the railroad gave to blacks in Texas relatively more freedom to travel, to work at jobs that allowed for greater economic well being and the ability to purchase instruments, to hear recording. By the year of an outpouring of jazz recordings that included the first appearances on records of King Oliver, Fletcher Henderson, and Duke Ellington. Texans had been at the forefront of black music, beginning with Scott Joplin of ragtime fame and continuing with Blind Lemon Jefferson, the King of Country blues, and some of the earliest boogie woogie pianists who had recorded by 1924 in Chicago.4 Texas also were present on some of the earliest and most vital jazz recordings, including several made in 1923 by Bennie Moten, Jelly Roll Morton, and Fletcher Henderson.

At the end of the 1920s, two of the most important Wisconsin jazz musicians appeared on the scene: trumpeter Bunny Berigan of Fox Lake and clarinetist Woody Herman of Milwaukee.5 Around 1928, contact between Wisconsin and Texas occurred in jazz terms when Woody Herman reportedly toured the state of Texas with the Joe Lichten band, with which he had played during his attendance at high school.6 This marked the first in a fascinating series of musical interactions between Wisconsin and Texas, but rather than through musicians visiting one another’s states, it came primarily through their participation in recording sessions that took place elsewhere, usually in Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles. For at least five decades, from the 1930s through the 1970s, a number of Wisconsin and Texas sidemen worked together to create a wide variety of jazz, often based on the blues form. Indeed, during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Wisconsin and Texas jazz musicians would take part in recording sessions that produced outstanding examples of the prominent jazz styles of those periods, from swing to bop to the cool West Coast sound.

Although there were no Wisconsin musicians present—at least so far as I can tell—on a recording of “Bugle Call Rag,” made in Los Angeles in 1924 by the group called “Jimmie’s Joys,”7 the performance comes from the year of an outpouring of jazz recordings that included the first appearances on records of King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, and this piece is a remarkable example of jazz style and technique.8 Jimmie’s Joys was a group of musicians from Austin who regularly played for dances at the University of Texas, and their rendition of “Bugle Call Rag” already contains many, if not all, the characteristics of jazz, including the use of a well-known natural or manmade sound as the basis for a piece of music—in this case, a bugle call, breaks, in which a soloist inserts a phrase or passage when the rest of the band stops playing; quotations from popular songs, here the

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This piece is a classic blues of the kind that Teagarden trademarked from the late 1920s, titled simply “Blues in E-Flat.” On this date, the JATP musicians included tenor saxophonist jazzman, pianist Teeddy Wilson of Austin, for a recording ensuing music. However, why would an advanced group such as the JATP in the same year of the first Bebop recording session (reportedly organized by Texas Budd Johnson), resort to quoting a rather corny flagwaving tune such as “Yankee Doodle Dandy?” It seems unlikely that Callender would have imitated the NORK recording, since so much early jazz tended to be rejected as out of date by later practicing musicians. However, this could be unfair to Callender, who may well have been aware of a tradition established by NORK and carried on by Jimmie’s Joys. In terms of the Wisconsin-Texas nexus, more to the point is the solo electric guitar work of Les Paul, who would later achieve his greatest fame with the electric guitarist Mary Ford on their version of “How High the Moon,” which pioneered the use of overdriving. Paul would break it all into a high-pitched tenor combining to convert this ragtime tune into an updated JATP exhibition full of exhilarating sonic booms and a crowd-pleasing frenetic pace. Also significant here is the fact that JATP organizer Norman Granz broke the color line by writing into every contract that blacks and whites could attend the concerts together, just as black Texasian Illinois Jacquet jammed with white Les Paul from Wisconsin.

Norman Granz broke the color line by writing into every contract that blacks and whites could attend the concerts together, just as black Texasian Illinois Jacquet jammed with white Les Paul from Wisconsin. Granz’s most famous recording came in 1937, with his stirring version of “I Can’t Get Started,” which featured both his technically secure trumpet playing and his romantic vocal treat-
In 1946, Woody Herman would, for the first time, record in the new bebop-influenced style of his bands of the mid to late 1940s, and on this occasion, too, a Texan—in fact two Texans—would form part of the Herman herd that cut a tune entitled “Chuck.” Soloing on tenor saxophone is Bud Johnson, a black multi-reed musician from Dallas. Not soloing but present in the saxophone section is Mexican-American multi-reed musician Ernie Caceres from Rockport, Texas. Woody’s clarinetist is in especially fine form on this rocking, bluesy tune, but it is Bud Johnson soloing on tenor who digs deeply into his emotive bag to come up with some tones and lines that were unusual for the Herman band and were the first black jazz inflections to be heard on the group’s recordings. Joop Visser even concedes that Johnson’s “happy synthesis of [the styles of tenor saxophonists] Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins . . . steals the show.”

Also, the combination of black and Mexican-American musicians was another first for the band, with a later version of the Herd briefly including alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges and Cuban trombonist Juan Tizol, both from the Ellington Orchestra. Another tune on which Bud Johnson performs admirably is entitled “It Must Be Jelly (‘Cause Jam Don’t Shake Like That).” Although Herman and vocalist Frances Wayne sing the novelty lyrics for fun, Johnson’s tenor is not fooling around, as he once again digs in for some beautiful, serious jazz, filled with swooping phrases, bent notes, and a conversational style, followed by Herman’s pure, penetrating tone on clarinet. Instrumentally, the contrasting sounds and approaches of the two musicians complement one another and make for a fully satisfying performance.

Next to “At the Woodchoppers’ Ball,” probably the most famous number Herman recorded was “Four Brothers,” a composition and arrangement by Texas multi-reed musician and composer Jimmy Giuffre of Dallas. Giuffre’s arrangement for three tenor saxophones and a baritone established an identifiable bebop-era sound for the Herman herd, which continued to employ the same saxophone set-up for several decades to come. The first recording of “Four Brothers,” made in December 1947, featured the four brothers of the title, which refers to saxophonists Zoot Sims, Serge Chaloff (on baritone), Herbie Steward, and Stan Getz, who solo in turn and conclude the piece with cameos. Giuffre was not a member of the herd at the time of this recording but would appear as a tenor saxophonist in the Herman band during 1948 and 1949. One tune recorded in July, 1949, is entitled “Not Really the Blues,” of which it has been observed that the piece “happens to be one of the few jazz compositions with a totally apt title. It is the blues, but spread out over sixteen bars instead of the usual twelve.” The opening trumpets in the 1949 Herd were Shotty Rogers of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and it was through the association of Giuffre and Rogers as alumni of the Herman herd in general offers a swinging brand of 1930s jazz.

The jam at the end of this piece has Herman’s clarinet wailing above and Lee blowing riffs below and tailgating in the best groove. Here Herman again sings the lyrics and also takes up his clarinet for a few tasteful licks. On a piece entitled “Slaughter’s Buzz,” Lee contributes a driving break on this up tempo tune, displaying more of his fine technical facility. Exhibiting Lee’s range is his warm, extended mute solo on the tune “Nola,” with the Texan’s flexible phrasing followed by Herman’s lilting clarinet. Lee’s most impressive outing comes on “Fan It,” where the Texas trumpeter who solos on “Woodchopper’s Ball,” which has been credited to Nelson.

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In 1937, the Herman herd was already a very swinging band, even before its more famous period after the war in 1945. The roaring open trumpet solo on “Big Wag in the Wigwam” is not identifiable, but could be the work of Nelson. The same is true of “Dallas Blues,” on which of course it would be wholly appropriate if the Texas trumpeter were the one taking the solo that is as forceful as on the previous blues. It certainly does sound to my ear like the same trumpeter who solos on “Woodchopper’s Ball,” which has been credited to Nelson.

Another tune on which Nelson performs is “Blue Prelude,” from 1940, which served at the time as the band’s theme song. Once more Nelson plays a wa-wa response to the lyrics sung by Herman, with the trumpet’s sound and style reminiscent of Coottie Williams, who at the time was doing his more famous wa-wa treatments for the Duke Ellington Orchestra. In 1941, Nelson returned to Texas, where in Houston he had first played in clubs on South Main before joining up with Herman. Nelson later moved to California, where he performed on the radio shows of Gary Moore, Dinah Shore, and Jimmy Durante, and also played with the bands of Jimmy Dorsey and Hal McIntyre.

However, it was Nelson’s brief stay with Woody Herman that placed him at the beginning of his band career and introduced him in the recording of some of the Herman unit’s most vital blues numbers, “At the Woodchopper’s Ball” and “Blue Flame.”
Woody Herman was responsible for training and promoting innumerable sidemen who went on to success on their own, and Jimmy Giuffre was but one Texan who profited from working with the Wisconsin leader. Giuffre’s own piano-less trio, formed around 1956, brought him the widest recognition, both for his playing and his writing talents. At the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, Giuffre performed with his trio consisting at the time of Bob Brookmeyer on trombone and Ralph Neira on bass. A film of the Festival captures the Giuffre 3 performing one of his more famous compositions, the folky tune entitled “The Train and the River,” written originally for his trio with Jim Hall on guitar.

Another Herman alumna from Texas was bassist Harry Babasin of Dallas, who was in the Second Herd of 1948, along with Giuffre and Rogers. Babasin participated in a recording session on May 12 that produced another version of Giuffre’s “Pee Wee Blues,” apparently written by his pianist, Buddy Johnson.

Babasin himself would, like Giuffre, end up in Los Angeles where, in 1952, he arranged for and performed on a recording session with Charlie Parker and Clark Terry, and, in 1953, he would form part of an historic recording on which jazz and bossa nova were first combined.

The next Texan to form part of the Woody Herman organization was Gene Roland, also of Dallas. A fellow student with Jimmy Giuffre and Harry Babasin at North Texas State University in Denton, Roland is credited with the idea of arranging for a sax section of four tenors, which Giuffre modified in writing and arranged his “Four Brothers” for the Herman Herd. Roland was the first important arranger for the Stan Kenton Orchestra in the mid 1940s but also arranged for a number of other bands, including that of Woody Herman, whose staff he joined in 1957 as chief arranger. In 1958, Roland arranged seven of the twelve tunes recorded by the Herman band for its album entitled Woody Herman ’58. In speaking of his arrangement of “Blue Satin,” Roland remarked that it was a “slow blues typically in the Woody saxophone solo, punctuated in Roland’s arrangement by shak- ing, muted brass. The loping piano motif, which is something of a Texan trait, sets the relaxed blues mood, with trombonist Bill Harris supplying some sad, slithery phrases. The title of another Roland arrangement, “Waltz in the Woodshed,” plays on the similar title of an early recording from 1941, “Woodshedding With Woody,” on which Steady Nelson had formed part of the trumpet section, along with Wisconsin trumpeter Cappy Lewis of Brillton.

How many Texans may have passed through the Herman big-band academy I am unable to say for certain, but will mention one other, trumpeter Dennis Donoxon of Jacksonville, whose work with Herman in 1975 I have not heard but do know his performances on the 1990 recording, Return to the Wide Open Spaces, with fellow Texan James Clay and David “Fats” Newman. The 1975 aggregation was not Herman’s last, since he continued to lead groups up until his death in 1987, but even so, Donoxon represents a long line of Texans stretching from Sonny Lee Herman’s first group of 1936 through Steady Nelson, Dean Kincaide, Bud Johnson, Ernie Caceres, Jimmy Giuffre, and Harry Babasin in the mid 1940s to Gene Roland in the 1950s and to the final Texas musician that I will discuss, black drummer Gus Johnson of Tyler, who was with Herman in the 1960s.

The 1975 aggregation featured Woody Herman with a small group of himself, a piano, bass, and drums, and was made in 1962, and on this occasion Gus Johnson occupied the percussion seat. Bud and Gus Johnson (no relation) were two of the few blacks ever to record with the Herman Herds, but both were key players on the recordings on which they appeared. Titled The Woody Herman Quartet: Swing Low, Sweet Clarinet, the 1962 album consists almost entirely of standard jazz tunes, from “Rose Room” and “Don’t Be That Way” to two of clarinetist Artie Shaw’s famous features, “Begin the Beguine” and “Sum- mit Ridge Drive.” The one more typical Herman piece is entitled “The Wire Blues,” apparently written by his pianist, Nat Pierce.

In speaking of the members of his quartet, Herman remarked that “The guys are the rhythm section that’s been with me for quite a while and we work well together.” This is perhaps most evident on “Sweet Lorraine,” which swings at any easy gait, with Johnson’s unobtrusive snare-drum licks just enough to keep things perking along nicely. After the waltz-time theme statement on “Begin the Beguine,” Johnson drives the piece expertly with his steady timekeeping and his rim-shot backbeats in four-four; his drum role before the final section sets up a fine contrast for the tune’s conclusion. However, it is his haunting rhythm pattern on the tom-tom and his subtle cymbal work for “Pee Wee Blues” that are a high point of his presence on this album, although his drumming on “Don’t Be That Way” is also outstanding, as it is on “Summit Ridge Drive.”

In all, Gus Johnson shows here why he was so successful as the percussionist for the Jay McShann Orchestra, the last of the great Kansas City big bands in the early 1940s, and for what was tagged the New Testament band of Count Basie in the early 1950s. Just as Woody Herman made authentic jazz with whites or blacks, Gus Johnson too could contribute to any type of ensemble, and both men from states with little in common in terms of weather, history, or cultural heritage could unite to create the harmonious, engaging sounds of swinging jazz. In addition to Bunny Berigan and Woody Herman with their big bands and combos, one other Wisconsin jazz musician who teamed up with a Texan was bassist Harry Babasin. In 1956, Clark joined Jimmy Giuffre for a recording session with a sextet led by Lennie Niehaus, an alto saxophonist and composer who had made a name for himself by anchoring the sax section of the Stan Kenton Orchestra. In putting together his piano-less sextet, Niehaus brought together the special talents of the Wis- consin bassist in conjuction with drums and a front line of alto, tenor, and baritone saxes and trumpet, a rather un- usual combination that proved refreshing in the best West Coast tradi- tion. Clark reportedly toured Europe with a Giuffre unit in 1959, but I have thus far found no recordings for such a group.

Fortunately, the Niehaus Sextet session allows a listener to hear these musicians from Wisconsin and Texas working as part of a superlative ensemble, with the
music on Niehaus’s album marked by the clean lines and crisp execution of so much of the West Coast music of this period.16


17. A shorter, preliminary version of this essay was presented at Lake- land College in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, on October 1, 2003. I wish
to thank Karl Eldler and Lakeland College for inviting me to speak as part of their Knopf Fine Arts Lecture Series. One of the first
Wisconsin musicians that I was aware of hearing, without know-
ing that this was so, was Joe Dodds, drummer with the early Dave Brubeck Quartet. I began my lec-
ture at Lakeland College “with a bang not a whimper,” to para-
phrase T.S. Eliot, by playing Dodds’ bass drum thud that opens
“The A Team,” on Brubeck’s VHS Jazz Goes to College (Co-
bumbooks, New York, 1954). Although there was no connection
between the two, I wonder if Dodds, seeing that I know of it, had
own personal memories of listening with pleasure to Dodge and
the early Brubeck Quartet that was my excuse for beginning the
stage talk with an example of his typically “kicking” the bass drum in
so much American music as the railroad.2

2. Visser, The Woody Herman Story. 22


25. “Blue Prelude,” a pop song by Monte Byrom and M. J. Picibanik, was recorded by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and Jelly Roll Morton
Jazz at the Philharmonic, July 15, 1941, at Basin Street Club, New Orleans. See Appendix E (n.p.).

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trumpet solo here is taken by Cappy Lewis of Brillion, Wisconsin.
Yet another blues on which Nelson solos is the classic “Frenesi-
“Blue Flames,” and on “Bonnie’s Blues” he vocalizes with Herman. He
also is heard singing the phrase “Beat Me Daddy, Eight to the Bar.” See Robert C. Kriebel’s notes to The Woody Herman Story, 1952.


28. Information on Steady Nelson’s later years was supplied to me by his niece, Larry Carol. Larry also informed me that his
jig was the same as the vocals on two sides recorded by the Herman Herd, “Oh, California,” a song that predated the 1945 “California” that the
Herman Herd recorded with such instrumental stars as trombonist
Bill Harris and bass player Chubby Jackson; and “Whatcha
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(AMP 20-4565). Quoted in the liner notes by Nat Hentoff, to
skids,15 of course. The Negroes at the University of Texas from 1920 to 1922, and has been credited with organizing Jimmie’s Joys. Later, in
1956, he fronted Dick Vernon’s Wolveshounds, which had previously included the leg-
dary Ray Bauduc. In 1929, Bauduc formed his own orchestra,
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