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by Gary Marmorstein

IF YOU BEGIN BENEATH the Santa Monica Freeway in downtown Los Angeles and walk south on Central Avenue to 103rd Street, you'll tour a narrow, semi-industrial, burned-out street replete with liquor stores, boarded storefronts, auto suppliers, fast-food franchises, the occasional Baptist church, a few metal warehouses and, at 48th Street, the lone apartment building that scrapes the sky though it stands less than ten stories high. These days the sounds of Central Avenue come mostly from buses and the cracked mufflers of battered cars. Forty years ago, however, along and around this seven-mile stretch of avenue, there was a sunburst of black identity and activity orchestrated by the music we have come to call jazz.

During the 1940s, the decade connecting World War II and the dawn of the so-called Eisenhower Era, Los Angeles was a mecca for black musicians. Among the notable jazz musicians who arrived in those days and hung around the scene were Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, Nat "King" Cole, Howard McGhee, Kenny Dorham, Ray Brown, Red Callendar, Jimmy Rowles, Oscar Peterson, Barney Kessel and Shelly Manne; those who were raised or came of age here include Charles Mingus, Dexter Gordon, Eric Dolphy, Hampton Hawes, Zoot Sims, Art Pepper, Teddy Edwards, Sonny Criss, Harold Land Sr., Jimmy Knepper and Art Farmer.

New York City has been the most notorious of black American music cities: the Harlem nightlife of the 1920s, which included the tail end of stride piano and the heyday of the dance band, segued into the 52nd Street clubs of the 1940s. New Orleans has long been acknowledged as the womb of ragtime, of Dixieland, and — with Louis Armstrong's maturity — of the improvised

jazz solo. And Chicago was home not only to many big bands and to Jelly Roll Morton but to the urban blues that make up the foundation of most R&B in this country.

Somehow, though, Los Angeles's contribution to Afro-American music is too often overlooked. One reason may be that Los Angeles, despite its downtown, has never had a definable geographic center. Its nightlife spots were, and still are, sprinkled over dozens of neighborhoods and suburbs. Another reason may be that Los Angeles was, musically speaking, a relatively late bloomer; it did not become one of the major urban areas of black population until the spring of 1942, when the Southern Pacific Railroad Company imported hundreds of workers and their families from southern states.[1] By then the United States had entered the war in the Pacific and able-bodied males were in short supply. As black immigration to Los Angeles quickened, Central Avenue, which ran parallel to the Southern Pacific line down to Slauson Avenue (where it bisected the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe line before tailing east), became the locus of black business and recreation — which included black music.

The first wave of black migration to Los Angeles had actually occurred in the late 1880s, a few years after a federal ban on Chinese laborers went into effect; the then almighty California Cotton Growers and Manufacturers Association brought southern blacks west to work in the agricultural regions north of Los Angeles County.[2] Nominally "free" since the Emancipation Proclamation (September 1862), blacks were still denied rights and privileges routinely accorded whites. In southern California, which was a weird amalgam of eastern and midwestern Protestant influences draped over an essentially Hispanic culture, the prevalent attitude of whites toward blacks was one of rampant fear and ignorance. (Los Angeles, as a political entity off to the sidelines of the Civil War, was sympathetic to the Confederate cause.) In *Southern California Country,* Carey McWilliams quoted a comment typical of most editions of the Los Angeles *News* of 1867, less than two years before passage of the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution: "The soul of the Negro is as black and as putrid as his body. Should such a creature vote? He has no more capacity for reason than his native hyena or crocodile."[3]

Such barely controlled racial hysteria was still very much in evidence after 1900, when Los Angeles began to overtake San Francisco as the urban center of the West. By the 1920s, blacks all over the country, especially in those states that comprise what is now called the Sun Belt, were feeling the depressed conditions of farming regions and mining towns. For many of them, the only logical migratory step was to the cities — and to the West.[4]

At first, newly-arrived black families clustered around Temple Street downtown. As more blacks arrived in the 20s, they were shunted south toward "Mud Town" (probably named for the wildcat oil wells that dotted the fields of south central Los Angeles), otherwise known as Watts, which was annexed to the city of Los Angeles in 1926.[5] It was Central Avenue that most directly connected the older black district with Watts.

One musician who arrived during Central Avenue's boom period in the early 1940s was drummer/bandleader Roy Porter. A native of a Colorado mining town that fell off the map once the mines dried up, Porter came to Los Angeles in June 1944, a month shy of age twenty-one. Cast adrift in this unfamiliar town, Porter went looking for a drumming gig. He found one when he replaced the crazy scat singer Leo Watson in the Spirits of Rhythm. With Porter's muscular drumming, the Spirits garnered a following among white afficionados and frequently played Major Kayes', on Cahuenga Boulevard, then considered the west side of town for a black group.[6]

"It was all over on the east side of town," Porter told writer David Keller. "At the time Howard McGhee was working at the Down Beat, there would be Johnny Otis with his big band at Club Alabam, which was only three or four doors down. Across the street would be Slim Gaillard with his 'Cement Mixer-Putty Putty' thing."[7]

By the mid-1940s, Central Avenue had become *the* jazz thoroughfare of the West. On Central itself, there were dozens of legitimate nightclubs, including The Brown Bomber, Bird in the Basket,[8] and the lounge at the Dunbar Hotel, where pianist/singer Nellie Lutcher held court for a time.[9] And there were the so-called breakfast clubs — after-hours places where you brought

your own booze and danced past sunrise. One of the most popular of these was Lovejoy's, where singer Jimmy Witherspoon hung out when he wasn't washing dishes at the old Owl drugstore, at 8th and Broadway.[10] There were dances at the Masonic, at 52nd and Central, and at the YMCA, at 28th and Naomi, where black bands could play if they were sponsored, even though blacks were not permitted to use the swimming pool.[11] There were day concerts at the South Park bandshell, at Avalon and 53rd. Black musicians gathered at their own union, Local 767, located on Central underneath the Santa Monica Freeway. Record stores that featured black music were clustered near the corner of Central and Vernon; someone called "Flash" had two or three shops in the neighborhood, and a Dolphin's of Hollywood record store stood there until the owner was shot and killed.[12]

There are widely divergent views on how safe Central was at the time. "You could walk from 1st Street to 103rd all night long and the police wouldn't bother you," music teacher Samuel Brown said recently.[13] The Red Car trolley was the mode of public transportation, and riding south from downtown to Watts on the "V" line, you could watch pedestrians hopping from one club to another and sleek cars cruising by to see who was playing where. In his autobiography *Raise Up Off Me,* the late pianist Hampton Hawes recalls, "On any weekend night on Central Avenue in the 1940s you could probably see more blinking red lights than on any other thoroughfare in the country."[14] According to Hawes, whole clubs full of patrons were often taken down to the Newton Street stationhouse, near 14th and Central, by white cops searching for drugs and weapons.[15] In his 1935 study *Los Angeles: City of Dreams,* white reporter Harry Carr wrote:

> Central Avenue has jazz nightclubs, tough Negroes with razors, joints as rough as Beal [*sic*] Street, Memphis.... My boot-black tells me that the race feeling here is perverse and dangerous. "Yah suh, Boss," he says. "Down in Mississippi I know where I belongs; but in California I don't know kin I or kint I. I stand in front of a soda fountain uptown and I asks myself: 'Black boy is you ain't or ain't you is.' Do I dare go in or don't I?"[16]

Although Carr's point of view seems to derive from another century, he was, to be fair, trying to convey the Los Angeles

practice of Jim Crow, which was subtler and therefore potentially more hateful than in other parts of the country. If a black male was suspected of holding narcotics, spotted driving a car with out-of-state plates, or found consorting with a white woman, he was harassed, if not booked, by the police.

Black men and white women together, in the Los Angeles of the 1940s, were part of a larger set of complex social issues that were hardly abstract to patrons and musicians of the Central Avenue scene. Just as white New Yorkers sashayed up to Harlem earlier in the century to sit in whites-only audiences to hear black entertainers such as Cab Calloway, so white Hollywood and west side residents drove over to Central Avenue to take in the wilder, harder swinging black music that filled the clubs. In *Beneath the Underdog,* the somewhat fictionalized biography of bassist Charles Mingus, scenes abound of east side liaisons between black male musicians and the white women who came in from the Hollywood Hills to experience the music — and whatever kicks came along during the night.[17] "Our music was catching on," wrote Hampton Hawes, "drawing... the white middle-class chicks, the rebels who were turning away from Horace Heidt, pulled by the realness of the black music and the excitement and hipness of the atmosphere."[18] A Los Angeles native, Hawes was raised at 59th and Budlong, near USC, in what was referred to before World War II as the "green-lawn" district, and he and his childhood friends "identified with Errol Flynn, Ann Sheridan and Gloria DeHaven" — white movie stars who conceivably stepped downtown now and then to take in a scene that barely resembled Romanoff's or The Brown Derby.[19]

When blacks and whites mixed socially, it was *only* on the east side; it simply wasn't done north or west of downtown; and downtown itself was riddled with Jim Crow policy. Samuel Brown recalls the eerie humiliation of being forced to sit in the balcony (derisively called "Nigger Heaven") of the one-time RKO Theater, at 8th and Broadway, to hear Ethel Waters sing. Brown often ran into pianist Art Tatum after hours on Central Avenue, but he could not go hear Tatum play at the Swanee Inn, a white-owned club on Westwood Boulevard, because "they didn't want you there." As a general rule, it was all right for a popular black musician to play a white club, providing there were no

union hassles — a black artist such as Tatum, in fact, was in great demand at Hollywood parties, where his playing was often captured by wire recorders — but it was definitely not all right for a black patron to venture too far west to hear that same black musician. It's no wonder that Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, a universally loved black entertainer, quietly amassed his fortune playing "darky" parts in Shirley Temple movies while militantly carrying a gun to protect himself and his family from white harassment and building himself the finest house on the east side, at 37th and Vermont.[20]

It was into this Jim Crow atmosphere — this air of quiet bigotry and unspoken geographic sanctions — that the great altoist Charlie "Bird" Parker arrived in December 1945 to play Billy Berg's in Hollywood. Already highly sophisticated in recognizing and deflecting the most subtle forms of racism, Parker would still have a tough time in Los Angeles during the next eight months. Almost immediately upon arrival, Parker got strung out on bad heroin procured on Central Avenue, and he remained aloof and irresponsible until the evening he met one Emry Byrd — otherwise known as "Moose the Mooche."[21]

"A personable, sanguine man," Ross Russell wrote in *Bird Lives!,* "the Moose once had been an athletic star and honor student at Jefferson High."[22] The Moose's legs, however, had become paralyzed by a bout with polio, and his Central Avenue shoeshine stand, which featured racks of records for sale, was actually a miniature drug warehouse. After scoring from the Moose, Charlie Parker, on his way to a recording session on Santa Monica Boulevard in Roy Porter's car,[23] wrote the now famous "Moose the Mooche," and subsequently signed a contract with Dial Records in which he turned over half his Dial royalties to Emry Byrd. Within a few years, the Moose was behind bars up in San Quentin and writing to Dial's attorney asking for his money.[24]

Parker remained in Los Angeles after the rest of his band had gone home to New York. Ross Russell, then a proprietor of Tempo Music Shop, at 5946 Hollywood Boulevard, across from Florentine Gardens, had recently begun the Dial label. Russell subsequently recorded Parker and Roy Porter at the C.P. MacGregor Studio on Western Avenue.[25] Parker was invited to play in the

"Jazz at the Philharmonic" series, which derived its name from the old Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium, on Pershing Square, and which kept the name long after the dance-inciting black music had been banished from its hallowed halls. For much of his Los Angeles stay, Parker would thrill his young worshippers by taking their proferred "axes" and blowing a bar or two, and he often sat in on gigs at the Club Royale (Highland off Hollywood Boulevard), the Hi-De-Ho (Western and 50th), or the Club Finale.[26]

The Finale was located at 115 South San Pedro Street in what was actually the Little Tokyo section downtown but was, during the war, variously called "Little Harlem" or "Bronzeville" because American blacks had replaced the area's Japanese-Americans, most of whom had been placed in internment camps for the duration.[27] The Finale was a breakfast club owned by vaudevillian Foster Johnson, who liked to station himself below the bandstand and dance to Parker's solos. When Johnson wearied of paying off the cops, he closed the club. The Howard McGhees reopened the Finale, but they had their own hassles with the cops because the great trumpeter was black and Mrs. McGhee was white. Parker, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly crazed by a combination of heroin and local Jim Crow and finally blew his lid at the Civic Hotel, up the block at San Pedro and First, where he was found wandering through the lobby wearing nothing but a pair of socks. His next whistle stop was Camarillo State Hospital.[28]

Musical luminaries other than Charlie Parker had already made Los Angeles their home base. Louis Armstrong, who did not much care for the bebop purveyed on Central Avenue (although without him bebop would not have existed), was often in town for movie work. Lionel Hampton was here so often he began to use saxophonist Dexter Gordon's father as his regular physician. Art Tatum was a fixture. Nat Cole, who had often played the 331 Club on 8th Street and served as intermission pianist at the Swanee Club, had recently become the first black pop singer with a commercial appeal to both blacks and whites.

But there were other musicians coming of age. Charles Mingus grew up on 108th in Watts, attended the One Hundred Eleventh Street Elementary School,[29] between Central and

Wilmington,[30] and, with his family, attended Grant's Chapel First A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church at 108th and Compton. After a long, painful stint playing cello with the Los Angeles Junior Philharmonic, Mingus went to Jordan High, on 103rd near Alameda. Mingus' education in composition accelerated under Lloyd Reese, who had a studio on McKinley Avenue two blocks west of Central and taught many of the musicians then growing up in the city.[31] One of Reese's other students was Eric Dolphy.

Dolphy, too, was born in Los Angeles, played clarinet in the West 36th Street School band, learned oboe at Foshay Junior High (on Western between Jefferson and what was formerly Santa Barbara and is now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard), cut the grass for Lloyd Reese to help pay for his lessons, and, while at Dorsey High, on Coliseum near Crenshaw, came under the tutelage of horn expert Merle Johnston. Before Dolphy left town to join the Navy and begin the musical explorations that would place him at the forefront of postbop musicians, he played at Los Angeles City College with saxophonist/vocalist Vi Redd, as well as in the bands of Roy Porter and Gerald Wilson.[32] One of Wilson's other alumni was trombonist-turned-pianist Horace Tapscott.

Tapscott attended Lafayette Junior High, near 14th and Central, where he came under the influence of municipal conductor Percy MacDavid. In the late 40s, Tapscott attended what was probably the most musically active of public schools, Jefferson High, at Jefferson and Central. While a student, Tapscott could attend the dances at the Elks Club, which was a stone's throw from the high school, or the popular talent shows at the nearby Lincoln Theater, on 23rd and Central.[33]

But at the Down Beat, "we'd stand outside and go in at intermission" — unless, of course, he and his friends had a mature individual to accompany them.[34] Usually that job fell to Samuel Brown, the first black teacher at Jefferson High and the educator who has probably taught more great young jazz musicians than any other in Los Angeles.

"I went all the time with the kids," Brown said recently. He remembers walking down Central, poking his head into places such as the Crescendo or Club Araby, and it wasn't unusual for

him to see his students up on the bandstands. Brown grew up on 33rd Street, took piano lessons from his grandmother, and graduated from Jefferson High in 1926. He began teaching at the night school there in 1933. "I was fresh from USC," he said. "Jazz was an obscene word then. We'd say, 'Do you play jazz?' and you'd say, 'Oh, no!'"[35]

For his students' solid musical foundations, Brown gives much of the credit to the black church. "The church," he said, "was the focal point of all blacks everywhere — socially, politically, musically."[36] Black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois visited Brown's church, the People's Independence at 18th and Paloma, where Eric Dolphy's mother Sadie sang in the choir. Horace Tapscott, who attended the New Hope Baptist (formerly also at 18th and Paloma, now at 52nd and Central), which had not one but *two* orchestras, said, "Dancing, playing horns and drums in the churches in the 1930s — that's where it all started."[37] Eric Dolphy briefly taught Sunday School at the Westminster Presbyterian, where Hampton Hawes's father preached.[38]

In the 1920s and 1930s in Los Angeles, black children went to church as a matter of course. As Horace Tapscott said, "Most of the young black kids in my generation *had* to go to church. That's not true today."[39] Without the church as a musical training ground, young black musicians frequently had to go outside their communities to pick up a musical education.

But it was not just the change in church attendance that began to transform Central Avenue, which, by 1952, had lost much of the nightlife electricity it had had during the war. In fact, Samuel Brown insists that the war itself catalyzed both the rise and fall of Central Avenue. "We gained and we lost," he said. "The nightclubs had begun to jump; things were thriving. They were trying to get the boys to enlist. A lot of the kids went and came back drunk. Everything was completely segregated everywhere. It had its effect."[40] When writer David Keller asked Roy Porter why the Central Avenue jazz scene broke up, Porter replied:

> There's really no one answer. First off, the war ended, and all the soldiers who had money in their pockets went home. Then the Red Car electric trolleys were taken off the

> streets.... Some of the younger musicians started using drugs because they wanted to be like Charlie Parker.... But the music had to move on. It couldn't stay on Central Avenue forever.[41]

Minus the economic boom and patriotic fervor of the war years, there was a less celebratory feeling, and the music between downtown and Watts took on a grittier edge: many musicians turned to what they knew first and best — the blues. R&B clubs such as Johnny Otis's Barrelhouse, at 106th and Wilmington, and the Sawdust Inn began to attract a wider clientele. Tied in with airplay and commercial time, juke box records could better accomodate the three- or four-minute R&B hits than the longer, more improvisatory jazz recordings. The West Coast purveyors of "Cool Jazz," who were primarily white, were receiving more ink. The old Jim Crow policies downtown began to lift, and blacks were — at least officially — welcome on the west side. The black and white musicians' unions amalgamated in 1952, throwing open more professional doors.

Many of the musicians dispersed. Mingus and Dolphy both landed in New York, where, separately and together, they made jazz history before their relatively early deaths. Dexter Gordon, Hampton Hawes, and scores of others settled in Europe, where their music was better appreciated. Some, such as bassist Red Callendar, stayed in town and did session work; live radio was a thing of the past, but all those movies and television shows had to be scored by professional musicians.

Samuel Brown is now retired and lives in a spacious home near Hamilton High School. Horace Tapscott continues to play around Los Angeles, on solo piano and with his "Arkestra." Roy Porter, who emerged from San Quentin where he served drug time in the 50s, manages an apartment building he owns in the mid-city district of Los Angeles, frequently composing on his Mason upright and overseeing the publication of his auto-biography.

If, as Roy Porter said, the music had to move on, then at least it left its mark on east side residents and visitors of the decade. And all along the street that connects the Japanese Temple with the Watts Towers and Civic Center with the most famous black

suburb in the nation, arpeggios, rim shots and glissandos echo in the night air.

NOTES

Acknowledgment. Another version of this article appeared originally in the Los Angeles *Herald* and is reprinted in revised form by permission.

[1]Keith E. Collins, *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940-1950* (Los Angeles: Century Twenty-One Publishing, no date given), p. 5.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946), p. 324.

[4]Collins, *Black Los Angeles,* p. 6.

[5]McWilliams, *Southern California Country,* p. 325.

[6]Conversation with Roy Porter, August 1984.

[7]David Keller, "An Interview with Roy Porter," *Jazz Heritage Foundation Newsletter,* IV, No. 5 (Los Angeles: Jazz Heritage Foundation, September/October 1983): 14-15.

[8]Conversation with Roy Porter.

[9]Whitney Balliett, *Night Creature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 262.

[10]Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

[11]Conversation with Samuel Brown, August 1984.

[12]Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters.*

[13]Conversation with Samuel Brown.

[14]Hampton Hawes & Don Asher, *Raise Up Off Me* (New York: Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan), p. 29.

[15]*Ibid.*

[16]Harry Carr, *Los Angeles: City of Dreams* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935), p. 248.

[17]Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

[18]Hawes and Asher, *Raise Up Off Me,* p. 29.

[19]*Ibid.,* p. 3.

[20]Conversation with Samuel Brown.

[21]Ross Russell, *Bird Lives!* (London: Quartet Books, 1972), p. 202.

[22]*Ibid.*

[23]Conversation with Roy Porter.

[24]Russell, *Bird Lives!,* p. 217.

[25]*Ibid.,* p. 221

[26]*Ibid.,* p. 206.

[27]McWilliams, *Southern California Country,* p. 325.

[28]Russell, *Bird Lives!,* p. 229.

[29]Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog.*

[30]*Gillespie's Guide to Los Angeles City and County* (Los Angeles: California Map Co., 1950).

[31]Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog.*

[32]Vladamir Simosko & Barry Tepperman, *Eric Dolphy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979).

[33]Conversation with Horace Tapscott, September 1984.

[34]*Ibid.*

[35]Conversation with Samuel Brown.

[36]*Ibid.*

[37]Conversation with Horace Tapscott.

[38]Hawes and Asher, *Raise Up Off Me,* p. 2.

[39]Conversation with Horace Tapscott.

[40]Conversation with Samuel Brown.

[41]"Interview with Roy Porter," p. 19.