



The Making of a Musician



Philadelphia (1922–1938)

Joe Wilder was born on February 22, 1922, in Colwyn, Pennsylvania, a small township between Philadelphia and Darby. He was delivered—most likely in the family home on Front Street—by Dr. Edward Pratt Woolard, a white obstetrician, whom the family respected (Joe’s youngest brother, Edward, was named for him). Joe’s father, Curtis—his real name was Carpenter Curtis Wilder, but preferring “Curtis,” he dropped “Carpenter”—was born November 23, 1900. In 1910, he had been sent by his family from their home in Winfall, North Carolina, to live with relatives in Philadelphia. “They didn’t want him growing up and sharecropping like the rest of them were doing,” Joe recalled.¹ Eventually, Curtis’s parents, James (born c. 1878) and Tarnetta (born c. 1884), joined their son in Philadelphia. Joe was named for his great uncle Josephus, James’s older brother.

Wilder (*second from left*) with fellow students of Frederick D. Griffin, Philadelphia, 1934. (*Wilder Family Collection.*)

Joe's mother, Augustine, was born on May 10, 1903, in Philadelphia. Her father, Lewis Mosley, was born in Pennsylvania in 1874, and her mother, Frances, was born in South Carolina in 1882. The 1920 U.S. Census lists Lewis's occupation as a laborer in an ice plant. Augustine, sixteen at the time of the 1920 census, was listed as a "machine hand" in a candy factory.

Both the Wilders and the Mosleys settled in Colwyn, renting row houses at 210 and 214 Front Street, next to the tracks of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. It was here that Joe's parents, Curtis and Augustine, known to all as Gussie, met and eventually married. Curtis's father moved his own family to nearby Saybrook Avenue, and apparently Curtis and Gussie took over the house at 210 Front Street, where Joe and his three brothers were born. The other three or four adjoining row houses were occupied by black families as well.

Joe's paternal grandfather, James Wilder, worked for the Fels Naptha soap factory, located on Island Road, which separated Philadelphia from Colwyn. Raw materials for soap production were delivered via the nearby railroad, and James was in charge of the workers who hoisted barrels of resin, the smell of which permeated the nearby community. "Even though he didn't make much," Joe said, "he saved enough money to eventually buy the building he lived in and two others on Saybrook Avenue."

Gussie would become a mainstay of the community—active in her church and women's social organizations. "She was a very gregarious and friendly person," Joe recalled. "She was very compassionate—if someone in the neighborhood was sick, she would always cook for them and have us bring the food over." She took courses in nursing and became a midwife and eventually became licensed as a beautician as well.

Curtis was undoubtedly Joe's greatest influence. Presaging Joe's own military service, during World War I, Curtis lied about his age and joined the Navy. From May until the war's end in November 1918, he served as a mess attendant—one of the only assignments available to black sailors at the time—aboard a troop ship, the U.S.S. *Orizaba*. Curtis was on board when the ship brought back celebrated bandleader James Reese Europe and his band from France in 1919. During his sixteen round-trips to Europe from the ship's home port of Hoboken, New Jersey, Curtis was also called upon to fulfill other duties: "If there was any shooting out at sea, my station was down in the bottom of the ship—not to have pleasure—but to send bags of gun powder up to the gunners. At seventeen, I did not realize the monumental danger we were in deep below the water line of the ship."²

Curtis reenlisted and served again during World War II, this time as a musician. Nearly forty-two years of age, in October 1942, Curtis enlisted by

traveling to New York from Philadelphia, where he had been working on the Navy base. After taking a test on tuba, he was designated musician second class, and after basic training, he was assigned to the Pasco Naval Air Station Band, a twenty-three-piece all-black group in Pasco, Washington. In addition to a busy musical schedule, the unit had other duties. “If the wheat fields would catch on fire, the members would have to go and help to put it out and save the raw food on many occasions,” he recalled.³ Curtis was discharged in January 1945. “Any member who was 45 years of age and came from a defense job could get out and go back,” he recalled. “I was glad to get in and was glad to get out.”⁴

Growing up, Joe recalled his father doing various jobs—mostly as a truck driver. “When I was little more than a toddler, my father was driving a stucco truck for a company in Colwyn,” he explained. “They would deliver the stuff to the builders. If we behaved, he let me and my brothers sound the truck’s air horn.” But more significantly, Curtis Wilder was also a musician and saw to it that his sons had every opportunity to develop their own musical talents.

Curtis began on cornet but switched to sousaphone, probably in the mid-1920s. “I never remembered him playing the cornet, but that was his first instrument,” Joe recalled. “He played it well enough to perform in the church—things like the ‘Inflamatus’ and a lot of the established cornet solos.” Curtis’s teacher was a noted Philadelphia African American cornet soloist named Frederick D. Griffin, who would later teach Joe as well. After trying a sousaphone, Curtis fell in love with it and gave up the cornet. He continued to receive instruction from Griffin on the new instrument. He later explained to Joe that the sousaphone was coming into vogue over the tuba because audiences liked the novelty of having the bell pointed at them rather than upward. As was the case with many sousaphone and tuba players in the 1920s, Curtis began to double on string bass. “He studied bass violin at the Philadelphia Settlement School with a fellow from the Philadelphia Orchestra and learned to play quite well,” Joe remembered. “It was kind of unusual because those guys usually didn’t have black students. He was an Italian, and my father loved him. He also loved my father because he was so studious.”⁵

Curtis remembered that his first professional engagement came in 1928, with an orchestra led by Raymond Smith, a celebrated violinist and bandleader: “I was selected to play bass for Raymond Smith’s dance band on a steady job, which was my first one. It was my first professional one. It was at Brewer’s Café in Camden, New Jersey. I was very proud as though I was with the Philadelphia Orchestra.”⁶

Drummer and arranger Berisford “Shep” Shepherd, who went on to a distinguished career with Benny Carter, Artie Shaw, and Earl Bostic, among

others, grew up in Philadelphia. Five years Joe Wilder's senior, he recalled playing a couple of engagements with Joe's father, who impressed him with his musicality and technique: "He was the very first string bass player I worked with who was not slapping the strings. And he had a great sense of being part of a rhythm section."⁷ Although he played regularly as a sideman in a variety of local musical groups, music was not Curtis Wilder's main source of income. He continued to drive the stucco truck as well as make deliveries for local coal companies. He would not become a bandleader himself until after World War II.

In addition to his musical abilities, Joe Wilder inherited his devotion to learning from his father. He remembered Curtis, who died at the age of one hundred on September 19, 2001, as "having studied his whole life. He took correspondence courses in sociology and mathematics from the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania. My stepmother used to get annoyed with him and say, 'You're eighty years old! Why are you studying all that stuff?' He'd answer, 'Because yesterday I didn't know something, and today I know it.'" Curtis constantly stressed the need for education to his sons. "If we had a question about something we were studying in school, he wouldn't just give us the answer," Joe recalled. "He'd tell us to look it up, so we would retain it better than if someone just gave us the answer."

Other than the Wilders and their immediate neighbors on Front Street, the population of Colwyn was almost entirely white. The U.S. Censuses of 1920 and 1930 show only two other African American families residing in the Borough of Colwyn. In 1915, the Borough Council of Colwyn adopted an ordinance prohibiting "colored people from residing in those sections of the borough now exclusively occupied by white families," even though Colwyn was "known as one of the progressive boroughs in Delaware County."⁸ The *Philadelphia Tribune's* front-page coverage noted that members of the council felt the ordinance to be constitutional because it also prohibited white families from settling in black sections of the borough. The *Tribune* surmised that the reason "such an iniquitous measure should even be considered in Pennsylvania" could be attributed to the fact that "this little town is made up of some poor white people, some foreigners, some southerners." It noted that "it is difficult to find any appreciative number of native born white Pennsylvanians afflicted with such mean sentiment," adding that "they as a rule are pleased when colored people show a tendency to save money, buy property and evidence a desire for better home environments." The unsigned article concluded that "the great State of Pennsylvania . . . is more humiliated by the passage of such laws than are the people of color. Because such steps are steps backward."⁹

It is unclear whether this ordinance was ever enforced or was even still in effect by the time the Wilders arrived in Colwyn, probably in 1918 or 1919.¹⁰ Several white families lived near the Wilders' Front Street home, and the white and black children used to play freely together, as indicated by some surviving Wilder family photos. "We were all little kids—we didn't know black and white," Joe said. "We weren't going into restaurants and being told we wouldn't be served."

Joe's best friend was a young white girl named Helen Gibbons, who was the daughter of a friend of his mother. Joe and Helen walked over the railroad bridge together every day to the Colwyn Public School, where he and his brothers were among the only black students: "We were treated like all the other kids, until one day when I was coming out of school and one of the kids saw me and said something like, 'Look at the nigger.' Helen heard what the kid said and went over and said something to him. He got smart with her, and she slapped him. He said he was going home to get his family and threatened to jump her." When Helen's mother found out what had happened, she told Joe, "If anybody ever calls you that again, you jump on him and try to beat the living daylight out of him!"

In 1929, when Joe was seven, disaster struck the family: "Helen and I were coming back from school, and we heard the siren calling the volunteer firemen. We could see billowing smoke, so we started to follow it. When we crossed over the footbridge, we saw that it was my own house that was burning! My mother was outside hanging clothes on the clothesline and managed to get back into the house and save my brothers' lives." It turned out that Joe's younger brother, Edward, had inadvertently caused the blaze while playing with a kerosene lamp. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the entire row of houses was destroyed. In the aftermath, Joe remembered seeing the firemen removing the remains of the family piano and his father's melted sousaphone.

The Wilders moved in temporarily with Joe's paternal grandfather, James, and his family, who had by then settled nearby on Saybrook Avenue in Philadelphia. The move was devastating to Joe: "I thought my life was over, and I would never see Helen and my other friends again." Shortly afterward, Curtis, Gussie, and their four sons moved again—to a rented house nearby at 2018 South Seventieth Street, an integrated working-class neighborhood in Paschall, in Southeast Philadelphia. Despite his fears, Joe did maintain a lasting friendship with the Gibbons family, although he and his brothers were forced to endure the taunts of intoxicated patrons in an Irish bar they had to pass on their way to the old neighborhood in Colwyn.

After the fire, Joe and his brothers attended the Harriet Beecher Stowe School. The elementary school, which had expanded from a one-room

schoolhouse, was integrated and, according to Joe, there were approximately fifty black students. Joe's maternal grandfather, Lewis Mosley, had been a student there, and Joe even was taught by one of his teachers, a Miss Hess. "She was the oldest teacher in the school system—she was ninety when she taught us," Joe remembered. "When she found out who my grandfather was, she treated me like I was somebody special."

For the most part, Joe enjoyed the new school and was a good student. But as a young African American, he could not hide his disgust at certain traditions that he found offensive:

In the assembly, they used to make us sing all these old-fashioned Stephen Foster songs with "nigger" in them. For example, when we sang "Old Black Joe," all the kids would turn and point to me, and I would get furious. One teacher saw that I couldn't conceal my anger, and she asked me, "Why are you sitting there looking like a black cloud?" That really got to me, and I said something, so she sent me to the principal's office. The principal, Mrs. Dever, sent me home and said, "Don't come back without your mother." When I told my mother what had happened, she was livid. She said, "We're going back to the school *now*!" When we got to her office, the principal said, "Your son caused a disturbance at the assembly." And my mother answered, "I understand that the teacher said he looked like a black cloud. I don't appreciate that, and I don't want people referring to him like that." So they got together with the teacher, and while she didn't apologize, she agreed not to say it again.

Gussie had to make another visit to the school when Joe questioned a teacher's remark that the blacks in America were not as black as those in Africa. After eluding the teacher, who was chasing him with a yardstick, Joe was sent home by the principal and told once again not to return without his mother. And again, Gussie stood up for her son. "She didn't encourage us to challenge the teachers, but she would support us," Joe said. "She would reason with them, and that's how she was able to resolve any problem." Principal Dever told Gussie that her son "seems to be a very nice young man," adding, "but you know, he's very sensitive." Principal Dever decided that added responsibility might be helpful to the youngster, so she appointed him to the school's Safety Patrol, a coveted position. When she was replaced as principal by Mr. Kelly, an Army veteran, he taught the patrol members how to march and made Joe the patrol lieutenant: "I got a badge, and I was out there every

morning at seven thirty, even in the snow, seeing that the kids crossed the street safely. I was like a big hero! The cop who was supposed to be on duty knew I'd be there, so he wouldn't even bother to show up. He told me, 'You've been helping me, and I'm gonna take care of you!'"

As a youngster, Joe inherited his love of cooking from watching his mother and his grandmothers in the kitchen:

[One day] I thought I'd surprise my mother and make a cake for her. I put in all the ingredients and put the cake in the oven. It smelled just tremendous, but when I took it out of the oven, it was the same size as it was when I put it in. I hadn't put in any baking powder! You could have dropped it on the floor, and it would've bounced this high and wouldn't break. My mother thought it was so funny, and my brothers rode me to death!¹¹

He eventually mastered the art of baking and became famous for his fabled cheesecakes, often bringing samples to recording sessions to share with his fellow musicians.

Joe's legendary sense of decorum and propriety were certainly a product of his upbringing. While his parents were not "that strict," they set definite rules for Joe and his brothers: "First you had to do your homework; then you could go out and play." And transgressors were swiftly punished with a leather strap. Joe vividly recalled an incident involving a "skatemobile," a homemade but more elaborate predecessor of the skateboard:

We used to skate down the middle of our street, which was quite busy. A couple of kids got killed when someone came around the curve and didn't see them. My father was really hard on us about that. We had two cops in the neighborhood, one black and one white. The black cop was called "Swiftly" because you would see him here, and then you'd go to the other part of the neighborhood, and he'd be there when you arrived! The white cop was called "Sneaky" because all of a sudden he'd be on top of you, and you wouldn't know where he came from. So Sneaky came up and saw me on the street with my skatemobile. He grabbed me and took me to my house and rang the bell. My father came to the door, and he said, "The kid is out there in the middle of the street, and you know how dangerous that is." My father thanked him and said, "I'll take care of it." He got the leather strap, and I got a few welts on the fanny, and that was it.

Although the Wilder boys were generally well behaved and well liked in the neighborhood, they would occasionally get into some mischief, including attempting to drive their father's car: "He used to park it on the lot next to our house. My brothers and I would take the brake off and push it a couple of feet and then push it back so when he came home, it was where he had left it. We'd pretend we were driving."

Gussie Wilder was a religious woman and saw to it that Joe and his brothers attended services and Sunday school at the Phillips Brooks Episcopal Church on Lombard Street in downtown Philadelphia. "She was sincere about her religion, but she never beat people over the head with it," Joe recalled. Their minister, the Reverend Young, made an impression on Joe, who briefly entertained the notion of becoming a clergyman. "But at one time, I wanted to be a policeman," he said, "and that didn't work out either!" Drummer Shep Shepherd, who attended Sunday school with Joe, already saw in him the sense of decorum for which he would become famous: "He developed rapidly because he was a smart young man and didn't waste time with foolishness. Even as a kid, he took care of business."¹²

Joe's father's family were devout Baptists: "My paternal grandmother was a member of what we used to call the 'Holy Roller' church," Joe said. "They would get a storefront, put a cross in the window, and call it a church. We used to laugh at them, but their faith got them through the Depression and the period leading up to it." The youngster was impressed with the music he heard there, however: "They would swing! The tambourines would be wailing, and they'd be singing loud and making up hymns as they went along." Joe's uncle, Norton B. Wilder, his father's younger brother, was a bishop, and served as pastor of the Prayer of Faith Temple in Lynchburg, Virginia, for almost fifty years, until his death in 2000. His son, Joe's cousin Norton J. Wilder Sr. (1940–2012), was a Baptist minister who had a distinguished career in law enforcement. He served as Philadelphia's deputy mayor and "drug czar," as well as in various posts with the Drug Enforcement Administration in Washington.

As was the case in Colwyn, Joe remembered having both white and black friends in Philadelphia. His immediate neighbors on South Seventieth Street included families of various ethnic groups that got along well for the most part:

There was a Polish family across the street and the Kocherspergers, who were German-Irish next door, and we were all very close. My mother and those ladies were always talking together in the backyard. Of course, there were always some idiots, but we just ignored them. My brothers went to mostly white schools, and they had white friends who would come over to our house for lunch. One day, my younger

brother Calvin went with one of his friends to his house, and when his mother came in and saw him, she said, “Don’t you ever bring one of those people in here again!” My brother couldn’t understand why somebody would say something like that.

According to the 1930 U.S. Census, the heads of households on South Seventieth Street worked in a variety of professions, and included janitors, railroad and factory workers, house painters, postal workers, and a minister. Saxophonist Jimmy Heath, who was four years younger than Joe and also grew up in Philadelphia, noted, “Philadelphia was not completely segregated. We had other ethnic groups on our block. I remember an Italian family on the corner and a Jewish family nearby.”¹³ Clarinetist Buddy DeFranco, Joe’s contemporary and high school classmate, who grew up in South Philadelphia, also valued the area’s diversity: “There were Jewish neighborhoods next to Italian neighborhoods next to black neighborhoods. That was a good quality about the music in that area because black, white, people of different ethnic groups played together. We’d rehearse in each other’s homes. There was a common feeling among all of us as musicians.”¹⁴ And trumpeter Wilmer Wise, one generation removed from Joe, recalled, “I didn’t really have any racial problems as a kid. I have a kindergarten picture of my class in 1941 or 1942, and it was totally integrated. My elementary school class and junior high school were totally integrated. We lived in row houses in South Philly, and on one side we had an Italian family and on the other a Jewish family. As a kid, I spent more time in those houses eating three or four dinners every night. I had a wonderful experience as a kid in Philadelphia.”¹⁵

Drummer Shep Shepherd had a similar multicultural experience. He grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Northwest Philadelphia:

There was one street behind Diamond running parallel known as Edgely, with brick row houses. That one block from Twenty-Ninth to Thirtieth was primarily black, and most of those people went out into the rest of the neighborhood to do what they used to call “day’s work”—domestic work. They were very nice houses—tiny but nice. I went to Blaine School in the same neighborhood with the rest of the kids. I didn’t understand very well then why my friends Abie and Hy-mie couldn’t come out and play with me on Saturdays.¹⁶

The crushing economic effects of the Depression, however, made life difficult for both white and black families. Jimmy Heath remembered his family being on welfare at one point and going to pick up food at a distribution center

near the Wilder home.¹⁷ And Joe remembered the breadlines in his neighborhood, and how before school, he would accompany his father to Yeadon, an affluent Philadelphia suburb, to “go through the trash cans looking for stuff we could sell at the junkyard—old lamps, newspapers.” Joe also recalled how his next-door neighbor, Sam Kochersperger, who was an engineer for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, helped provide the Wilders with free coal: “He would tell us what day and time he would be coming by on his train, and we would walk on the side of the tracks south toward Darby. There was a steep incline, and the train would slow down, and Mr. Kochersperger would drop some coal onto the track. He would signal with the horn to let us know it was okay, and we’d start collecting the coal in bags we brought with us.”

Although the Wilders and other African Americans clearly lived harmoniously with whites in many areas of Philadelphia, conflict certainly existed, and violence was not unknown by any means. Joe remembered that both of his grandfathers used to travel to South Philadelphia in search of work during the Depression. “They had to go by trolley along Gray’s Ferry Avenue past the naval hospital,” he recalled. “A lot of Irish and Poles and Italians lived in that area, and when they saw these black guys on the trolley car, they would start throwing rocks. So my grandfathers and some of their friends brought their own rocks and got off the trolley and started retaliating when they were attacked. After that, they left them alone.” Joe and his brothers also had their share of altercations with both white and black kids in the neighborhood or at school. Joe often found himself on the losing end, until his Uncle Norton taught him how to box. Using his newly acquired skill, he was able to get the best of an Italian classmate who had referred to Joe Louis as “that nigger” after the boxer had defeated Primo Carnera in June 1935. Joe Louis was a hero in the black community, and his honor had to be defended at any cost.

Musical Beginnings

As a musician himself, Curtis Wilder naturally tried to instill his love of music in his four sons. Curtis taught the eldest boy, Curtis Jr., to play bass, and he became a professional musician, performing and recording with many jazz, pop, and rhythm-and-blues groups throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, including the popular Do Ray Me Trio, the Counts and Countess (with pianist Alma Smith), and the Evans-Faire Trio. Curtis Jr. was also a fine vocalist and used to perform duets with singer Damita Jo (DeBlanc) (for whom Janet “Damita Jo” Jackson was named). Curtis Jr. was a member of Damita Jo’s group when he died of cancer in 1963. Joe regretted not having had the chance to play with his brother, but both were on the road, and their musical paths

rarely crossed, with one notable exception: “Once when we were both in Los Angeles—I think I was with Jimmie Lunceford—we were staying at the same hotel, and we jammed with a guitar player and recorded a couple of things in the room. We had a good time. I don’t know what ever became of the recordings.”

Joe’s two younger brothers had talent but were not as serious as Curtis Jr. and Joe. “Calvin [1923–2007], who was next to me in age, could sit down at the piano and play just by ear,” Joe said. “My youngest brother, Edward, was doing pretty well on drums without reading any music. My father was always trying to teach them to read, and they’d make fun of him, and he’d get hacked.” In addition to encouraging his sons’ musical development, Curtis Sr. also imparted lessons about deportment and promptness that were to remain with Joe for life: “He would tell my brothers and me, ‘Just because you’re a Negro, doesn’t mean you have to be late. It’s better to show up an hour early than one minute late.’” When someone would praise Curtis Sr.’s musical abilities, he would say, “I knew other bass players who played just as well; the difference is that I would show up on time!”

The bands with which Joe’s father played used to rehearse at the Wilder home. “The other kids used to come and sit on our porch and listen to some good music for free,” Joe recalled. “I heard the horns playing and must have shown some reaction.” One day his father came home with a case and handed Joe, who was seven or eight at the time, an old but serviceable Holton cornet, which he had bought in a pawn shop. Joe was initially disappointed because he had harbored a secret admiration for the trombone: “My paternal grandparents lived directly across from the Saint Clements Catholic School, and they had a marching band. I used to watch these guys out front with the trombone slides going in and out, and I thought that was the greatest thing I’d ever seen!”

Curtis had a wide range of musical tastes and exposed his sons to all kinds of music: “We used to listen to the radio, and we’d hear Baja bands from Mexico, and I can remember my father saying, ‘My goodness, listen to those rascals double- and triple-tonguing!’ As we’d listen, my father would always call our attention to things. Duke Ellington was one of his favorites, but he also liked Guy Lombardo. The other musicians would laugh at him and say, ‘How can you like a band like that?’ He thought they were great because they played so well together and everyone had the same vibrato.”

Curtis arranged for one of his fellow band members, Henry Lowe, to give Joe his first lessons. “He was a good trumpet player but not an exceptional one,” Joe observed. Disappointed with his son’s slow progress, Curtis sent Joe to Frederick D. Griffin, who had been his own cornet and sousaphone teacher. The dignified Griffin was a local legend who had been a cornet soloist in the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry bands during World War I. He was heard regularly

on Philadelphia radio stations playing concert cornet pieces with pianist W. Franklin Hoxter, another noted African American Philadelphia musician. The Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company sponsored both a white and a black band, and Griffin was conductor of the latter, which was also heard regularly on WCAU radio in Philadelphia.¹⁸

Griffin was in demand as both a leader and featured soloist with the many local African American musical groups in Philadelphia in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, in March 1930, he directed the debut performance of the Symphony Orchestra Club at the Elks auditorium. Curtis Wilder was a member of the orchestra, and the *Philadelphia Tribune* singled him out for his “solo of bygone days ‘Asleep in the Deep’ rendered on double B flat bass horn.”¹⁹ “Fred Griffin was very fond of my family,” Joe remembered, and Griffin respected Joe’s father for his devotion to music. The previous November, Griffin played cornet solos at the wedding of Joe’s Aunt Myrtle, his mother’s sister.²⁰ A review of a 1931 performance by Griffin at the Shiloh Baptist Church called him “Philadelphia’s best known concert cornetist and trumpeter,” and noted that his performance of Herbert Clarke’s “Bride of the Waves” was “a clever demonstration of what can be done with a trumpet when in the hands of a clever player” and was “greeted with much applause.”²¹ “Mr. Griffin could play all those things from the Arban trumpet exercise book²² and all the Herbert Clarke cornet solos absolutely perfectly,” said Joe.

Griffin played bravura solo cornet pieces with roots in classical music and in the popular marching bands of the era, especially that of John Philip Sousa. The repertoire developed by such cornetist-composers as Herbert L. Clarke (1867–1945) comprised technically challenging set pieces, often played with piano accompaniment. Many of these works were adaptations of folk tunes or popular songs of the day and became immensely popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the advent of radio, by the mid-1920s, cornet soloists, such as Del Staigers (1899–1950), who played first chair with Nat Shilkret’s Victor Salon Orchestra from 1926 to 1942, were featured prominently on broadcasts. Joe Wilder, who was just beginning his own musical studies, heard these programs, and the virtuoso approach of Staigers and the other featured cornetists was to have a profound and lasting effect on his own stylistic development. Their technique not only influenced him as a trumpet player but would later contribute to his unique jazz improvisational approach.

Each week, Joe would make the trip downtown to Griffin’s studio at the Elks Club. “My father was paying Mr. Griffin 50 cents a lesson,” Joe recalled. “This was pre-Depression, and it was a chore to get the money together. Mr. Griffin was a wonderful teacher, very strict but compassionate, and he had tremendous ears. He could hear a bad note five blocks away! If he was

sitting next to you and you made a mistake, you'd get a fist on your leg: 'Don't you know that's a D-flat, not a C?' But he was a very affectionate man . . . and he helped me a great deal."²³ At that early stage, the youngster was simply interested in playing the trumpet and drew no stylistic distinctions: "I had no concept of what was jazz and what was classical. I was just trying to learn to play the notes."

While continuing his study with Frederick D. Griffin, Joe also took some lessons from trumpeter Cliff Haughton, whose brother, Chauncey, was a well-known saxophonist with Cab Calloway, Chick Webb, and other leading orchestras. "He played lead and could improvise some," Joe noted. "He was an exceptionally fine player and helped me a great deal." Haughton provided Joe's first formal training in jazz—not so much in improvisation but in phrasing within jazz arrangements, a skill that would soon serve him well and one that Fred Griffin, even though he was a gifted teacher, was unable to impart. "Mr. Griffin was strictly classical," Joe said, "so that most of the students he taught who played jazz used the same stiff classical approach for everything."

Under Griffin's strict tutelage, the youngster began to progress rapidly. "I thought it was great that you could see these notes and play them," he said. "And when I'd hear them, I'd think of what Mr. Griffin had played, and I felt like I was getting somewhere." Joe also became an inveterate practicer, a habit he continued into his nineties. "I practiced all the time," he said. "There were two white families that lived down the block from us. The Andersons were Swedish and were older and quite wealthy because they had a Rolls-Royce. The other family was the Elliots, who were very nice people. I would practice up in the bathroom, which had a window that opened toward the lot between our house and the Elliots', and Mrs. Elliot would always say, 'Joseph, will you stop playing that so-and-so cornet!' One time I swore at her, and she told my mother, and after she got done with me, I never did that again!"

Apparently, the trumpet was not the only instrument Joe practiced. The youngster would sneak up to the bedroom and play his father's sousaphone after he went off to work: "The mouthpiece is quite large, and the more I played, the more my embouchure would puff up. When my father came home from work, he would ask me to play some of the trumpet exercises I was learning, and I couldn't get a note out of the trumpet mouthpiece! He couldn't understand what was going on until one day he came home early and caught me fooling around on the sousaphone. He just laughed and said, 'Now I know what the problem is!'"

It was not long before Joe played in public for the first time. His nemesis, Principal Dever, decided that he should play taps at the school's Armistice Day celebration: "There was such a reaction to my playing that I thought, 'Gee,

this is not a bad thing to do.’ It might have been at that point that I decided I might like to be a professional musician.” He would soon be heard by much larger audiences and backed by some of the leading orchestras of the day.

Colored Kiddies of the Air: “Little Louis” Meets Pops

Philadelphia was home to the Parisian Tailoring Company, which in the early 1930s made uniforms for many of the leading black orchestras. “These weren’t military-type uniforms,” Joe recalled, “but sports jackets and slacks. And when these guys traveled, people would see what they had on and would say, ‘Where did you get that from?’” With business booming, as a way of paying back the community, Eddie Lieberman, the company’s chief cutter and a manager of musical acts on the side, devised a plan for a black children’s radio show to compete with the predominantly white *Horn and Hardart Children’s Hour*, sponsored by the well-known restaurant chain. Sam and Harry Kessler, who owned the tailoring company, agreed to sponsor the new program, and the *Parisian Tailor’s Colored Kiddies’ Radio Hour* debuted on Sunday, March 27, 1932, on Philadelphia’s station WPEN.²⁴

Joe, who had just turned ten, auditioned for the program and became a regular. His close childhood friend, Percy Heath Jr., who would later become the outstanding bassist with the Modern Jazz Quartet, also appeared on the program. Although he played violin as a child, Heath switched to bass because as Joe remembered, “He lived in a kind of rough area, and he said every time he was on his way to school, these black kids would see him and say, ‘Look at the sissy with the violin,’ and they would challenge him and make fun of him. Being named Percy didn’t help either!” On the radio show, however, Percy played neither violin nor bass but appeared as a singer. Percy once described his vocal style as “singing sepia Eddie Cantor,” and remembered Joe “playing his trumpet with the plunger then, *at 13 years old, man!*”²⁵ Younger brother Jimmy Heath remembered Percy scat singing on the program: “Percy always had a gift of gab, and he would do things in the street—people would call it rap now.”²⁶ Jimmy was only five when the program debuted but remembered hearing his brother and Joe Wilder: “Joe was outstanding on trumpet, and Percy was just cuttin’ the fool!”²⁷ Joe was a frequent visitor at the Heath home and developed a crush on Percy’s older sister Elizabeth. “I was around twelve years old and announced that I was going to marry her, which is what I knew people did when they liked someone,” Joe said. “Jimmy still kids me about that today!”

The *Colored Kiddies* radio show emanated from the stage of the Lincoln Theatre, on Broad and Lombard Streets, Philadelphia’s main venue for

leading black performers. Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, and Fats Waller were just some of regular headliners at the Lincoln in the mid-1930s. What was most extraordinary about the radio show is that the children were backed by members of these legendary orchestras. Because of Pennsylvania's blue laws, there could be no regular performances in clubs or theaters on Sunday. As Joe put it, "We could go out and shoot each other on Sunday, but we weren't allowed to play jazz!" So as part of their contracts with the theater, the visiting bands were obligated to play behind the youngsters during the one-hour broadcasts on Sunday mornings. "We had the joy of having every name band—Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Fletcher Henderson, Earl Hines, Count Basie, the Mills Blue Rhythm Band—play for us on their day off," Joe said. "They would improvise backgrounds for whatever we played, and they encouraged us. It was unbelievable!" Although the bandleaders themselves didn't usually play, they did come to the rehearsals to make sure that their musicians fulfilled the terms of their contracts. "They were all very nice to me," Joe said. "Because I was one of the only kids who was playing an instrument, they would always talk to me—especially the trumpet players." For example, Ed Lewis, a mainstay of Count Basie's trumpet section, told him, "Kid, you're going to be all right!" He also remembered that when Crawford Wethington, a saxophonist with the Mills Blue Rhythm Band, saw his cornet, he told him, "Kid, you don't want to go out there with your instrument all tarnished!" Joe recalled, "He took the cornet, cleaned it up, polished it, and gave it back to me before the program started. It looked brand new, and for a week, I was afraid to touch it!" In typical fashion, three decades later, Joe sought out the saxophonist, who by then had left music and was working for the Transit Authority in New York, to thank him.

The *Colored Kiddies* show was an immediate hit. The African American press gave it extensive coverage. In its review of the April 10, 1932, performance, which drew a live audience of more than two thousand, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported:

The audience was made up of both white and colored, with the former showing a most courteous interest in the proceedings. To hear these kiddies on the air affords one a splendid hour of entertainment, but to see them before the mike, some not half as tall as the instrument, and facing a crowd of over 2,000 people, gives one a thrill and makes you feel proud of them.²⁸

The reviews included Joe Wilder's first press notice: "A Louis Armstrong in the making was uncovered, in the person of Joseph Wilder, ten-year-old

trumpet player.”²⁹ Joe and the other “kiddie” performers showed tremendous poise appearing for the first time before such a large audience, although he admitted, “I didn’t know there were that many people out there. I was standing back stage, and they just said, ‘It’s time to go on,’ so out I went!” He also credited Ruth Mosely, the pianist who accompanied him and the other musical acts, with helping them through the ordeal: “She was a tremendous person and was like a mother to us.”

By the April 24, 1932, show, the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported overflow crowds at the Lincoln Theatre, “causing many thousands to be turned away” and prompting WPEN officials to try to secure the larger Convention Hall for future performances. The paper again named Joe Wilder as one of “those whose creditable performance added considerable versatility to an interesting and most pleasing broadcast.”³⁰ Joe continued to be praised in the *Tribune* for his performances, and the April 28, 1932, issue contained a short feature on him with a photo of a cherubic, round-faced ten-year-old Joe holding his trumpet. The article noted that the young musician also sold the *Tribune*, stating, “Joseph, the very energetic young son of Mr. and Mrs. Curtis Wilder, pays for his music lessons from his profits. If you have attended or tune in on the children’s hour at the Lincoln Theatre on Sunday mornings you have heard Joseph play his cornet.” Prophetically, the article concluded, “The TRIBUNE predicts a great musical career for Joseph.”³¹ Apparently, Joe’s budding celebrity adversely affected the young man’s usual modest demeanor, for he recalled that his father felt compelled to take him aside and say, “Joseph, for a ten-year-old cornet player, you play very well. But there are a lot of other ten-year-olds who play very well, too.” He left it at that, “Joe recalled, “but I got the message!”

The talented youngsters included singers, dancers, and even comedians, some of them as young as two years old. Some of the “kiddies” went on to professional careers, including singer Ida James, who later worked with Erskine Hawkins; Mary Louise Jones, who sang with Cab Calloway; Leon James, who joined Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers in the 1930s and toured with the Ink Spots in the 1940s as “Poke” of the Moke and Poke dance team; and James Cross and Eddie Hauptman, who formed the comedy duo of Stump and Stumpy (Hauptman was later replaced by Harold Cromer). Some of the youngsters began making appearances outside of the radio program. Joe recalled that Eddie Lieberman took him and several other “colored kiddies” to perform at a synagogue on Broad Street in Philadelphia: “He had taught Ida James how to sing ‘Eli, Eli,’ and she did it so beautifully that the whole congregation was crying.” Joe also played a cornet solo at the Union Tabernacle Church on a program sponsored by the Paschall Social Club in December 1934.³²

Joe explained that he was not improvising at all on these programs: “I would be playing the first trumpet part to some popular stock arrangement, like ‘The Waltz You Saved for Me’—just reading the melody note for note. And the people thought that this was great! They called me ‘Little Louis,’ not because I played anything like Louis Armstrong but just because I played the trumpet.” Armstrong, himself, was one of the visiting stars who appeared regularly at the Lincoln Theater, and Joe got a chance to meet him.

Louis Armstrong first appeared at the Lincoln Theatre in December 1932 and made several other visits in 1933 and 1936.³³ Joe’s encounter with Armstrong most likely took place in February 1936. On Friday, February 21, Armstrong opened a week at the theater with Luis Russell’s band, which also backed the *Colored Kiddies* for its weekly broadcast. The *Philadelphia Tribune* noted that Armstrong and his troupe “comes to Philadelphia direct from Connie’s Inn on Broadway . . . and promises ninety minutes of the hottest and most spectacular entertainment ever presented on any stage.”³⁴ The article also underscored the rigors endured by performers of that era, noting that Armstrong would be presenting five shows daily, the first beginning at twelve thirty in the afternoon. Louis, himself, did not play for the *Kiddies* broadcast but, according to Joe, was present for the Saturday rehearsal at which he heard the youngster play. “He was very nice to me that day,” Joe recalled. “He gave me a pass to the theater and told me, ‘Young man, you want to hear Pops play, you come every day.’”

Joe certainly knew who Armstrong was but did not fully appreciate the significance of this encounter until much later: “I knew he was a great personality, but I didn’t realize how great his stature was as a musician.” The youngster went to hear Armstrong’s show the day of the rehearsal and once more during the week. “I was impressed, but I didn’t understand that what he was doing was as great as it was because I was still trying to play like Del Staigers,” Joe said. “I do remember being impressed with his version of ‘Tiger Rag,’ where he played one hundred high C’s in a row. It was just great!”

Even as early as the mid-1930s, some members of the black community were disturbed by Armstrong’s stage persona. “My father and many other black musicians in Philadelphia thought he was an Uncle Tom because he was always smiling and showing his teeth,” Joe remembered. “Hearing them talk, I felt that way, too, for a time. I just didn’t know any better.” In time, however, his admiration for Armstrong grew, and he came to understand what obstacles the trumpeter had overcome. He learned to place Armstrong’s on-stage demeanor in context. Many years later, Joe was in the orchestra for the NBC *Kraft Music Hall* television show when Armstrong appeared as a guest

in September 1967. During an interview segment, Joe recalled that Armstrong became very serious and said, “Everyone thinks that Pops is a ‘Tom,’ but in those days you could be lynched if you didn’t play the game—you didn’t know if you would live or die.” Joe noted, “He looked so sad that I had tears in my eyes hearing him tell about it.”

Looking back, Joe realized that Armstrong had made a greater impression on him than he thought at the time: “I guess he influenced me obliquely, because his cadenzas and things like certainly made an impression. Even today, when I’m improvising and I want to embellish something, I think in terms of what Louis Armstrong did.” Joe never forgot Armstrong’s kindness during that first meeting and kept the pass the trumpeter had given him. Over the years, Joe and Armstrong would meet periodically. “I think he took pride in the fact that I had made it in the studios,” Joe said, “and he always remembered me as the kid trumpeter in Philadelphia. He would tell me, ‘I always knew you were going to make it!’”

At the time of his meeting with Armstrong, Joe was about to turn fourteen and was gaining some celebrity thanks to his radio appearances. In announcing the *Colored Kiddies* show for August 16, 1936, the *Philadelphia Tribune* included Wilder—still known as “Joseph”—in a short list of “well known kiddie stars” to be featured with “a supporting cast of over one hundred and fifty children” in a revue called “Dixie in Harlem.”³⁵ Unfortunately, Joe could not escape the kind of offensive material he had objected to a few years earlier in elementary school. One of the numbers in the show was “That’s Why Darkies Were Born.” Although the song had been recorded by Paul Robeson and the lyrics have a certain sarcastic connotation, the “sensitive” fourteen-year-old no doubt found it distasteful.

Joe and a hundred other young performers traveled to Atlantic City in early September 1936 for an outing sponsored by the Parisian Tailor’s Sam Kessler. The *Philadelphia Tribune* singled out Joe’s performance in a swing trio, consisting of his friends Eddie Lambert on guitar and John Cook on washboard: “When they started to swing ‘Robins and Roses,’ even Old Neptune rose from the bottom of the sea and started to truck.”³⁶ The *Kiddies’ Hour* concept was becoming so popular that a rival show began broadcasting from the stage of the new uptown Nixon Grand Theater in August 1936.³⁷ Although some of the child performers seemed to appear on both programs, Joe did not recall ever playing on the Nixon Grand show, which was produced by Harry Slatko, who had managed the Lincoln Theatre until March 1936, when he came under attack for mistreating the employees.³⁸ The Lincoln show began to refer to its troupe as the “Original Parisian Tailor’s Colored Kiddies.”³⁹ Joe continued to appear on the program at least until his first year of high school. He is listed

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in a display ad for a “*Parisian Tailor’s Kiddie Hour*” broadcast on October 23, 1938, from the “WPEN Ballroom,”⁴⁰ and was mentioned (as “Joe,” not “Joseph”) in a list of “stars” from the same show after it aired.⁴¹