

# THE COUNT BASIE ORCHESTRA

Jazz is an American invention of the 20th century. Its sound is the "modern art" of music. In his 80 year life span, William "Count" Basie so expanded and elevated the art form that his legacy is regarded as "an American Institution" by modern music's connoisseurs worldwide. Yet the affable "Count" was a very modest gentleman. His motions and musical "conversations" at the piano closely paralleled his approach to life itself. So one might predict he'd be elated to know that the orchestral institution he founded in 1936 is still thriving today.

His sixth-sense quickly assessed each sideman's potential as an ingredient for the distinctive sound of his group. The Count's manner earned the respect of his peers, the affection of his players, and contributed to the rapid success of the new group.

With a keyboard touch or two, sound was set into motion. Always swinging, his piano spots became the band's claim to fame. A simple "Plink, Plink, Plink" closing triplet was all the "signature" his music needed. Despite half a century of changing tastes in popular music, the endurance of The Count Basie Orchestra confirms the genius of his earliest musical instincts.

The Count Basie Orchestra of today is nineteen performances committed to upholding and advancing this "American Institution." Some members are new, yet the majority of the sound still swings from musicians hand-picked by Count Basie himself. They are in demand for television and films, have won every respected jazz poll in the world at least once, and continue to accumulate awards and special recognitions.

## William "Count" Basie

William Basie was born an only child on August 21, 1904 in Red Bank, New Jersey. As a child, Basie's mother and a German lady named Holloway took care of his music training. Originally, Basie wanted to play the drums. But competition at this instrument from his boyhood friend, Sonny Greer, helped him choose the piano.

In the 1920's, like many young jazz musicians of the time, Basie left New Jersey for Harlem. Here Jazz piano greats such as James P. Johnson, Lucky Roberts, and Willie "The Lion" Smith were serving as major influences. Harlem provided a perfect place to work and learn. From cabarets to theatres to saloons, there was always an opening somewhere for a person with talent to play. Basie cites his most important influence as Thomas "Fats" Waller. He first heard Waller playing the pipe organ at the Lincoln Theatre, One-Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street. Through his many visits to the theatre, Basie got to know Waller and eventually was asked to sit along side him at the console.

One of Basie's first jobs was with an act called Kattie Crippin and Her Kids and later another act called Hippity Hope. Early in his music career, he also played with June Clark's

band and accompanied singers Clara Smith and Maggie Jones. Soon after this he joined a road show led by Gonzel White. The show included Basie playing in a four-piece band and even acting the part of a villain in one of the comedy skits. While tour with Gonzel White's show, Basie became familiar with Walter Page's Blue Devils in which he eventually joined. Basie is quoted as saying it was the "happiest band I've ever been in." The Blue Devils broke up in the early 1930s upon which Basie joined the Bennie Morton Band. He remained with this band until 1935 when Morton died. Basie returned to Kansas City.

It was here that the Count Basie Band began to form. Basie and several other former Morton Band members began playing at the Reno Club. One of their shows at the Reno Club was broadcast and the announcer dubbed Basie, Count Basie, to compete with other bandleaders such as Duke Ellington. In addition to these broadcasts giving Basie his new name, recording executive John Hammond also heard one of the broadcasts. Hammond liked what he heard and convinced a booking agency to take on the band. In October of 1935, 4 more men were added rounding out Count Basie's band.

The band began recording immediately. Count Basie's record contract called for twenty-four sides to be produced with no royalties given to Basie. It also tied Basie to the record company for three more years. In return, Basie received seven hundred and fifty dollars. This sort of deal was typical of the record industry's exploitation of jazz musicians. The contract was eventually brought up to union standards, but Basie never got any royalties for such hits as One O'clock Jump, Swingin' the Blues or Jumpin' at the Woodside.

The Count Basie and his band began to slowly obtain acclaim. Today many musicians consider Count Basie's band to be the model for "ensemble rhythmic conception and tonal balance". During the 1930's, the band's lightness and precision set the tone for modern jazz accompanying style. Basie himself perfected a piano style called comping. Comping refers to the syncopated and highly precise style of playing chords. Accompanying pianists would use this style of play for the next thirty years. Along with the Count Basie Bands contributions to the jazz style, the band also served to launch many careers. These include tenor saxophonist Lester Young, trumpeter Buck Clayton, trumpeter-composer Thad Jones, bassist Walter Page, drummer Jo Jones, and many others. Count Basie died on April 26, 1984 in Hollywood, Florida.

#### Selected Discography:

*Count Basie*, Brunswick  
*Count Basie & his Orchestra*, Decca  
*Basie's Back in Town*, Epic  
*Blues by Basie*, Columbia  
*Count Basie Classics*, Columbia  
*Lester Leaps In*, Epic  
*The Swinging Count*, Clef

#### Literature Cited:

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Reisner, Robert. 1977. *The Jazz Titans*. New York: Da Capo Press. Shapiro, Nat. 1957.

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