

Celebrating  
**COUNT  
BASIE**  
on His  
Centennial

# O Sound of ness

By John Janowiak

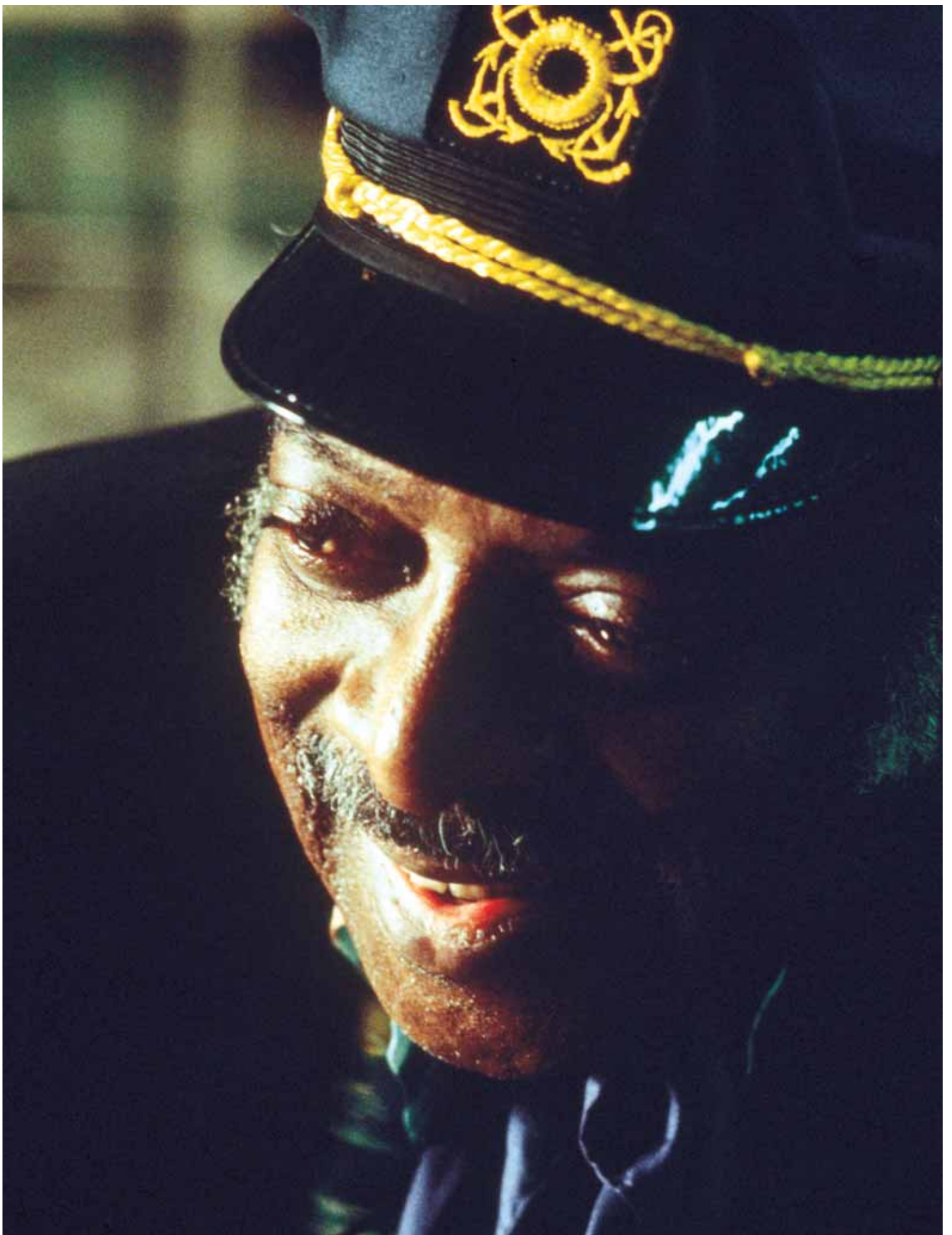
A man of sparse notes and few words, Count Basie was a simple person whose talents ran deep. Somehow, with a nod of the head, a point of the finger or a twinkle of the eye, he united generations of musicians behind a common cause: creating some of the most powerful big band music ever. Today, 20 years after his death and at the centennial of his birth, Basie's legacy—and his orchestra—are still going strong.

"We would play dances, and all of a sudden I'd look up and the entire band sounded like one horn," says baritone saxophonist John Williams. "It was amazing. You would see feet hitting the floor, and everybody breathing together. That could only come from a supreme catalyst that could get all of you to focus at the same time."

The setting is a hotel in Green Bay, where the Count Basie Orchestra has settled in for a series

of dates around Wisconsin. Six musicians, five of them band members when Basie was still alive, have gathered to reminisce about the man who made it all happen. It's a task they relish, since each of them has been touched by "Chief," as they tend to call him, in a personal way. They recall showing up to a rehearsal or gig and expecting to play a short stint as a sub, if they didn't get fired right away. And here they sit, marveling at how they earned Chief's respect and landed a gig that became a career.

Equally astonishing to them is that, here they are, still touring with the band 20 years after Basie died. Hearing their stories, it becomes plain that the Count Basie Orchestra of today cannot be dismissed as a ghost band. The sounds, the rhythms and the lessons that Basie taught are alive within veterans like Williams, bass trombonist Bill Hughes and drummer Butch Miles. Trombonist Clarence Banks and bassist James Leary each played with Basie for less than a year, but long enough to help them carry the torch of Basie's musical heritage. They're part of a continuum that began in Kansas City almost 70 years ago, when Bennie Moten died and his pianist, Bill Basie, started what would become the longest-running big band in history. Add them to a long list of Basie veterans that includes Lester Young,



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Representing a generation of musicians who never performed with Basie but are no less affected by his magic, trumpeter Scotty Barnhart had an epiphany at age 12 when he played the Basie record *The Chairman Of The Board* and heard "Blues In Hoss' Flat." "My life has not been the same since," he says. Once he heard the orchestra live, his destiny was set; he knew he would be in the Basie band someday. In 1993, the call came.

The 1980 album *On The Road* is another one that lit a fire under Barnhart. He takes issue with best-of compilations that stop with songs like "One O'Clock Jump" from 1937 or even "April In Paris" from 1955. "The band is still going," he says. "Basie was still recording up until 1984. People forget the '60s, '70s, '80s and what we're trying to do now."

It's unusual for a group to last so long after its leader's demise and still retain so many band members. The choice was not immediately clear. In the days when the pianist and bandleader was so sick with cancer that he couldn't get out of bed unassisted, Williams had a conversation with Basie about the future of the band. "I said, 'Chief, if you should predecease me, would you want this band to continue?' And he said, 'With my blessing. If you guys can go out there and take the music to the people, and still make a living for your families, do it.' The reason I asked him is because Stan Kenton had stipulated in his will that there would be no band with his name after his death. I said, 'Chief, if you die before me, I don't think I want to be in the band.' And I meant it at the time. But I don't think there's anyone who is as grateful as I am these last 20 years to have been in the band."

Confined to a motorized wheelchair in the 1980s, Basie's deteriorating health made him miss more and more shows. He was fit enough to attend a 1984 concert at the Hollywood Palladium, however; it turned out to be his next-to-last date and a memorable sendoff. "Everybody just came out to see him," says Banks, who had only been in the band for a few months at that point. "Old friends like Joe

Williams, Ella Fitzgerald and Quincy Jones were in attendance. Basie was beaming.

There was a week or two of uncertainty after he died on April 26, 1984, but the decision was made to keep the band going. It wasn't easy at first. "We were struggling out there when Basie passed," Banks says. "We had to cut salaries. But we just continued. Everybody just really enjoyed doing it." A Basie alumnus has led the band ever since: first Eric Dixon, then Thad Jones, Frank Foster and Grover Mitchell. When Mitchell passed away last year, Hughes continued the lineage. Hughes has spent the better part of 50 years in the Basie trombone section. He remembers exactly how he felt when he joined the band in September 1953: "I was scared as hell."

There's no guidebook or training course for becoming a member of the Count Basie Orchestra. It's always been a sink-or-swim situation. Though Basie was easygoing, there was no mistaking that he was the boss. He offered little in the way of verbal instruction, leaving the details to a designated musical leader or straw boss. By all accounts, his lifelong guitarist, Freddie Green, was downright fearsome. Make one wrong move and you'd get "The Ray," a lethal dart from his steely dark eyes.

Hughes says he was terrified his whole first year, but his first gig was a particularly hair-raising experience. Lead trombonist Henry Coker had an initiation rite in store for him. Between sets, he took Hughes upstairs to a bar and loaded him with stingers, cocktails that tasted like soft drinks but packed a wallop. "When we got ready to do the next set, I was drunk, and he wasn't. When I sat down, he said, 'Basie's over there at the piano; when he points at you, he means he wants you to stand up and take a solo.' I was so drunk, I don't think I played two correct notes in the set. Every now and then, I'd look at Basie out of the side of my eyes. And finally he did point to me. I stood up and fumbled through something, and I said, well, that's the end of this gig. But I guess he liked me well enough to keep me."

Miles was first called in as a sub in 1975, upon the recommendation of Buddy Rich. "I packed the one suit I had and flew to Chicago and set up the drums," Miles says. "Cold turkey, absolutely cold, no rehearsal or any-



thing. But fortunately I knew most of the stuff in the book from listening to the band forever. And it apparently came off all right that night." Miles stayed for four-and-a-half years, and would return again.

Leary at least had the benefit of a rehearsal before he began a run as bassist in 1982. But when he played his first gig, opening in Lake Tahoe with Sammy Davis Jr., none of the tunes he had rehearsed were in the set. "Wind Machine" was up first, and he was told to start it off. "I said, 'There's no count-off? How fast is the song?'" Leary remembers. "Basie points, and I start the song off, and I mangle the first two measures. It didn't matter, because the Basie band—WHAP!—it came in where it was supposed to come in."

Williams received a 3 a.m. phone call from Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis one night in 1970, asking him to fly to New York and join the band. "I said, 'If you're looking for a jazz soloist, I won't be able to make it, because I'm not going to come all the way to New York to hang myself.' He said, 'No, eventually we'll get you a solo to play, but Basie wants you to learn the book.'"

Williams felt that his position was shaky from the start. Then one night on the bandstand, Basie bowed his head as if to say, "Do you want to play a solo?" Williams did the unthinkable: He shook his head and declined. He figured he would be sent back home to Los Angeles any day. After the gig, he just wanted to avoid Basie and the termination that surely awaited. Making his way back to the hotel room that served as a dressing room, he walked among the trees and hedges, trying to keep a low profile.

"And who did I run into alone but Count Basie," Williams says. "My whole life in Los Angeles materialized in front of me. I kept always thinking that I'd never be able to make it. He looked at me and said, 'It's great having you in the band, kid.'"

Playing with Basie wasn't just about the music, Williams says, it was a character builder. If you stayed long enough, you were going to become a better person. "He always told me that his most successful bands were the ones where everybody liked each other and they were having fun. He said that was an unbeatable combination."

Basie knew everything about his musicians: their strengths and frailties both musically and socially. If you were married, he knew your wife, and if you were single, he knew your girlfriend. He made every musician feel important, and that fostered a unified sound. "It was a family, and the sound of oneness was something to behold," Williams says. "And the whole world was talking about it."

Basie called himself a builder. He built his band on a foundation of respect, and he had a

soft spot for his musicians' families. Like all bands, especially those that have spanned decades, the Count Basie Orchestra has had its ups and downs. Hughes recalls a period in the '70s when the replacements were ridiculous. "They got so bad that one day I walked up to Mr. Basie and said, 'I think it's time for us to give this up, disband.' And he looked at me fiercely. He said, 'Do you realize that I have 16 families depending on this weekly paycheck, and you're talking about disbanding?'"

An old-school gentleman, Basie rarely spoke ill of anyone. His vice, gambling, caused its

share of complications. But he treated his people with class. "God doesn't like ugly," he would say, meaning bad manners, not physical appearance. He got upset if his musicians entered a restaurant without removing their hats. Contrary to widespread belief, Basie's signature yachting cap was a stage prop, not something he wore all the time. For a period during the '70s, Williams was in charge of buying Basie's hats. People would steal them to keep as souvenirs, so Williams would visit the nearest Army-Navy surplus store and find the kind he liked—blue and inexpensive.

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# Hail To The Chief

REFLECTIONS ON COUNT BASIE'S SCHOOL OF SWING

## Saxophonist Frank Foster

When people ask me where I went to school for music, my answer is always the "Count Basie Academy of Rhythm." I learned more than I ever could learn at any conservatory. I learned not to make arrangements too busy, not to write too many notes down, because that interferes with the swing. He didn't write a note of music, but he could turn an arrangement into something acceptable. For instance, the song "Li'l Darlin'" was brought in by Neal Hefti as a medium swing tune. And when Basie listened to it in rehearsal, he said, "Let's slow that one down." We did and it became one of the biggest hits of the Basie band. I learned how to swing, and swing is what matters most to me.

## Trumpeter Clark Terry

Basie taught us the value of utilizing space and time. This is something important in improvising. Play something and leave something; get some, and leave some. He would never actually talk about it, he just did it.

## Writer/Arranger Sammy Nestico

Basie stuck to what he did best, and most of it was just good melodies that swung. He loved the blues, so he would always request blues arrangements. But other than that, I never remember him giving me any directions at all. He accepted the arrangers for what each one of us did. He was such a humble man that when I wrote "88 Basie Street," he just called it "88 Street." If I got upset about something, like at a recording session, he would say, "Just relax and let good things happen." That was the greatest advice, and I followed it years later.

## Pianist Junior Mance

Every December in the late '50s, Basie had the job at Birdland. He always hired a trio to play during intermission, and I was lucky enough to get the job. I told Basie, "You probably don't remember, but when I was 10 years old, my father brought me to meet you backstage at the Regal Theater in Chicago." He put his hand to his mouth and said, "Shhh, I don't want these guys to know how old I am." Amazingly, he remembered. One time my trio had a particularly good set. When we came off the stand, Basie put his arms around me and said, "You know what? I'm gonna break both your arms." I regard it as the greatest compliment I've ever had.

## Trombonist Fred Wesley

Playing with Count Basie was a dream. I was on the edge of leaving for the first month or so, but I hung in there and I stayed with the band a whole year in 1978. One time we went to Detroit, and George Clinton arranged to do a horn session with me while I was there. The session lasted from early in the morning until about hit time with the Basie band. When I showed up for the gig, Basie said, "Hey Fred, how you doing?" I said, "I'm tired, I've been in a session all day." That night, tunes came out of the book that I had never seen before. The only thing they had in common was they all had second trombone solos. He was teaching me a lesson that, if you think you're tired now, wait until you play this gig that you're getting paid for. It always amazed me how he controlled the band with his little plinks on the piano. I felt like I was in the presence of royalty for real. —J.J.



Williams still knows Basie's hat size: seven and five-eighths. "He had a huge brain and a big head."

Part of that huge brain knew just what to leave out. No one, save Miles Davis, is better known for saying so much with the spaces he left between notes. Basie was also known as a master editor, rejecting many more arrangements than he accepted.

In 1950, lean times led to the demise of the "Old Testament" Count Basie Orchestra. After scaling back to a small group for awhile, he ushered in the New Testament band—and an era of great arrangements. Arrangers like Neal Hefti, Ernie Wilkins and Frank Foster helped create a new impetus. Building on the call-and-response motifs that made the old band famous, they elevated the band's infectious head charts to sophisticated arrangements on a par with those of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Over the decades, a host of arrangers such as Thad Jones, Quincy Jones, Buster Harding, Wild Bill Davis and Sammy Nestico would help codify the Basie sound into a style all its own.

Eventually, the band was getting record dates almost every month, Hughes says, some of it overtly commercial (*Basie's Beatles Bag*, 1966), and much of it earth-shaking big band jazz (*Atomic Basie*, 1958). They backed up vocalists, from Frank Sinatra to pop stars like Tom Jones. In any case, nothing oils the gears better than constant gigging. Their performances were so tight in those days, they became informally known as the Basie Machine. Asked to describe the sound of his band, Basie would sum it up in three words: "Pat your foot." Miles supplies an asterisk, pointing out that the band's 4/4 swing has always been complemented by brilliant technique. "A lot of people have one or the other, but few have ever had both. This band has always had both."

With all its power, the band tends to lay back on the beat. That's a characteristic that evolved throughout the New Testament band and

continues to this day. "You'll find that the band took on a weight over the decades," Barnhart says.

According to Hughes, drummer Jo Jones could never play with the New Testament band because the feel had changed so much from his day. Horn players, no matter how well they sight-read, have to adjust to a whole new kind of phrasing when they join up. Miles quickly learned that there are times when he shouldn't follow the horns. On the sax soli of "In A Mellow Tone," for example, he remains rock steady, allowing the saxes to lay back and phrase their parts out of tempo but come back right in with the rhythm section. "James [Leary] and I try to set a framework so that the rhythm section is strong and the rest of the band can go about its own phrasing the way they want to do it," Miles says.

The laid-back feel had a lot to do with Green's guitar, which was a dominant rhythmic force even though it was scarcely heard beyond the bandstand. And few realize what a crucial part the bass plays in the Basie sound. "The bass player is not only the heartbeat, but he's the foundation of the band," Barnhart says. "You can have the best drummer, the best reeds and horns. But if those bass notes aren't in the right spot, where they have to be, then it's not going to be the band." The bassist's choice of notes centers around the tonic, with few harmonic extensions, and he generally plays four beats to the measure.

All these components add up to a sound like no other. Basie wasn't responsible for each innovation, but he made it all work. Williams sums up Basie as someone with a brilliant mind who used his talents to lead men. "I'm not talking about musical genius. I'm talking about a gift, a special aptitude. He seemed to be surrounded by patience. And that patience and that mind worked like hand and glove in controlling things and keeping all these personalities as one."

As legend has it, Freddie Green once put it another way: "The Count don't do much, but he does it better than anyone else." **DB**



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