

The Las Vegas

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## SPECIAL COUNT BASIE MEMORIAL SECTION

### Count Basie, last of the classic jazzmen

*Popular big band leader and innovative pianist dies at 79*

By Mikal Gilmore  
Herald pop music critic

Count Basie, who died yesterday morning at Doctors' Hospital in Hollywood, Fla., at age 79, was the last great classicist of American jazz. From 1936 through 1983, he led perhaps the most consistently exuberant big-band orchestra in pop and jazz history: Distinctive, protean ensembles that infused blues tradition with a precise, hard-edged rhythmic wit and that in later years — as jazz moved closer to embracing European and abstractionist values — stood to personify the fast-fading custom of gutsy swing. At the helm of these orchestral extravaganzas presided Basie; a rotund, subdued yet gleeful man whose spare and driving piano accompaniment provided a living, memorable link between the rococo bawdiness of his mentor, Fats Waller, and the disjunctive inventiveness of his stylistic successor, bop-era keyboardist Thelonious Monk.

Indeed, because Basie was such a keen promoter of soloists and vocalists (his early orchestra helped break such stars and prodigies as tenor saxophonists Lester Young, Herschal Evans, Illinois Jacquet, Paul Gonsalves, Wardell

Gray, Frank Wess and Frank Foster, and singers Billie Holiday, Jimmy Rushing and Helen Humes), it is easy to miss just what an imaginative, vital pianist he was. And yet several of the best moments of the band's 1930s and '40s recordings for Brunswick, Columbia and Camden were built around the singular, laconic phrasing that he favored, which left plenty of room for bassist Walter Page and drummer Jo Jones' rhythmic interplay, and which provided such fertile soloists as Young with prompting for resonant, romantic blues improvisations. The overall textural effect was both luxuriant and soulful and later had profound impact upon such a hard-bop/R&B-conscious arranger as Quincy Jones, who worked frequently with Basie in the '60s.

Interestingly, piano was a secondary choice for the band leader, who, during his youth in New Jersey and New York (he was born William Basie, in Red Bank, N.J., on Aug. 21, 1904), aspired to be an ensemble drummer. But apparently another hometown prodigy, William "Sonny" Greer (who worked as Duke Ellington's drummer for over 30 years), discouraged Basie's interest, and in the early 1920s, under the influence of the archetypal "stride" pio-

neer James P. Johnson — and the enigmatic Harlem keyboardist Fats Waller — he turned to piano and organ.

"I had dropped into the old Lincoln Theatre in Harlem," Basie once recalled, "and I heard a young fellow beating it out on an organ. From



COUNT BASIE

that time on, I was a daily customer, hanging onto every note, sitting behind him all the time, fascinated by the ease with which his hands pounded the keys and his feet manipulated the pedals. . . . One day he asked me whether I played the organ. 'No,' I said, 'but I'd give my right arm to

learn.' The next day he invited me to sit in the pit and start working the pedals. I sat on the floor watching his feet and using my hands to imitate him. Then I sat beside him and he taught me."

From his brief apprenticeship with Waller, Basie joined a half honky-tonk, half vaudevillian touring revue (the Gonzel White show), which shortly dissolved in Kansas City, Mo. — then the center for an inventive and soulful explosion that would transform jazz history and values. While in the Southwest, Basie joined a small group with bassist Walter Page and blues vocalist Jimmy Rushing

new smaller group had become one of the central forces in the Kansas City scene. Indeed, the band — which, in addition to Page and Rushing, included Lester Young, trumpeters Lips Page and Joe Keyes, and other brass and reed players — broadcast regularly from the Reno Club on station W9XBY. It was by way of these broadcasts that producer and talent scout John Hammond (who had helped sign and establish Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday and would later sign Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and Stevie Ray Vaughan) became interested in the new Basie band and began advancing them in the pages of the jazz journal *Downbeat*. Eventually Hammond brought the band to New York, convinced Basie to make a few personnel changes — including employing pre-eminent rhythm guitarist Freddie Green — and began recording them for Vocalion in 1939.

Unfortunately, relatively few of those terrific sides remain currently available, though the two-record *Super Chief* (Columbia) is a valuable sampler of Basie's 1936-42 career. It was during these years that — along with the orchestras of Duke Ellington and Jimmy Lunceford — Basie established his group as one of America's dominant big bands and as the one with the greatest across-the-board popular appeal. Whereas Ellington emphasized texture and composition, and Lunceford promoted inventive arrangements, Basie specialized in clear-cut, single-line musicianship and propulsive rhythm parts. In fact, his orches-

tra was much like an aggressive supporting unit that advanced individual styles over textural totality. In particular, the sharp contrasts between Young's tempered, legato tenor work and Evans' boisterous, raw manner made those early performances so vivid and indelible. Numerous hits occurred in this time — including "Jumpin' at the Woodside," "One O'Clock Jump" and "Swingin' the Blues" — all of which extrapolated basic blues form into expansive and dynamic performances.

Throughout the '40s, the Basie band thrived, and as jazz itself became more hard-tempered and rhythmically adventurous under the influence of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell, Basie accommodated some of that trend by incorporating younger, equally assertive musicians into his orchestra. Among them were several exemplars of the Southwest's emerging, R&B-influenced "honk" school, including tenor players Illinois Jacquet, Don Byas, Wardell Gray and Lucky Thompson. (Along with Ellington's, Basie's band was one of the leading breeding grounds for great saxophonists in jazz).

Indeed, he eventually regained his vivacity. Through the '60s he recorded several lively sessions with Quincy Jones, Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra, and in the '70s he produced a remarkable series of nonsense big band and small ensemble sessions for Norman Granz's fine classicist label Pablo, which demonstrated that Basie retained his vigor and dexterity up until the end of his career.