

# Monitor Manuscripts

## ...but jazz got in the way



Wilbur "Buck" Clayton

A review of *Buck Clayton's Jazz World* by Buck Clayton, assisted by Nancy Miller Elliott (London: Macmillan, 1986).

This is a very intimate, very personal autobiography of one of the world's great jazz musicians—Buck Clayton, trumpeter and arranger of jazz music.

It spans the period from 1911 to 1986, when at 75 years of age, Wilbur "Buck" Clayton is still swinging.

Buck Clayton's autobiography is at the same time the story of one phase of American social history. It is probably one of the most detailed chronicles of

life on the entertainment circuit during the Great Depression.

One might say that Buck has been swinging all his life. (One feels free to call him "Buck" after reading the first few pages. His book engenders the kind of familiarity that breeds only respect and admiration.) He begins his unique story with these words:

"It was swinging one morning in Parsons, Kansas, around ten o'clock on November 12th 1911, when I was born. This is my story, the life of a jazz musician."

His father, Simeon Oliver Clayton, was very talented as a musician, a good poet and writer, and the publisher and editor of a newspaper.

Although she never asked him not to play jazz, Buck's mother did not like jazz. She thought it was only for lowlife people; and this was not the kind of life she wanted for her son. After witnessing many knifings and shootings in so-called "bucket of blood" places, Buck often thought that she was right. After he played Carnegie Hall, however, his mother eased up on jazz, saying: "Well, if jazz has come along so far that it can be played in Carnegie Hall, then it must be [all right]."

In this period of segregation, the Clayton home was often in demand to host visiting Black dignitaries such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Roland Hayes.

At age 14, Buck was considered a good artist in school. He won first prize in a contest given by Parsons for the best poster for the Community Chest Drive. In fact, he might have become a commercial artist, "but" he says, "jazz got in the way."

The reviewer of Buck Clayton's book for his hometown newspaper, the *Parson Sun*, said that there are "only two real problems" with the book: "First, it contains just one chapter about his boyhood in Parsons. Second, it doesn't come with sound."

After reading *Buck Clayton's Jazz World*, our readers will no doubt agree with the *Parsons Sun* reviewer and regret that there is no sound, but one can see why Parsons came out with only 29 pages when one follows Buck to many of the major cities of the United States, Shanghai, Japan, Australia and many of the capitals of Europe.

This is truly an amazing book. Buck reports in detail on everywhere he played and everyone he worked with. Either he has a fantastic memory or he has a journal hidden away somewhere that may be worth its weight in gold.

This 216-page book takes the reader step-by-step and detail-by-detail via what Buck calls "little anecdotes and stories" through his youth in Parsons, his teen years in Los Angeles, his experiences as a bandleader in Shanghai and on the West Coast in the mid-1930's, the Count Basie years (1936-1943) and his army service.

Chapters lead the reader on the tour known as JATP (Jazz at the Philharmonic), a trip to Japan and Australia and on his first and subsequent trips to Europe. We visit most of the historic places in each city of renown with Buck as our tour guide.

In the chapter called "Health Problems," we suffer with Buck through what one friend called "the sudden and savage reversal of his fortunes." We grieve with him at the death of his son, Steven. Through it all, Buck's courage is admirable.

On first reading, this reviewer was disappointed that the editing of this book had not been more extensive, but on second reading, a certain authentic flavor emerged that was like a personal visit with this great jazzman.

The book further contains an index, a discography (by Bob Weir) and 29 fine photographs. We highly recommend this book to jazz buffs, students of history and to all who enjoy a very good story.