

FROM

**B**IRDLAND

TO

**B**ROADWAY

scenes from a jazz life

**B I L L C R O W**

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From  
Birdland  
to  
Broadway

*Scenes from a jazz life*

BILL CROW

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*For Mom, and for Dan*

While assembling my first book, *Jazz Anecdotes*, I decided that, since I had more than enough material from other musicians to fill that book, I would save my own personal stories for this volume. Although most of this book is new, some of it has appeared in slightly different form in Gene Lees's *Jazzletter* and in my column "The Band Room" in *Allegro*, the monthly newspaper of New York's Local 802, American Federation of Musicians.

New City, New York  
March 1992

B.C.

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*From Birdland to Broadway*

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## *chapter 1*

# Birdland

Birdland was my alma mater. I studied for a little while at another institute of higher learning, the University of Washington in Seattle, but when I dropped out and moved to New York, Birdland became my college of modern jazz. The illustrious professors there, who taught by example, were some of the world's finest jazz musicians. The dean of them all was Charlie Parker, "Bird," for whom the club was named.

I studied hard and learned my lessons well at Birdland. But if anyone had told me when I first arrived that just two years later I would be playing on that hallowed bandstand myself, I would have scoffed. And had that prophet declared that the instrument I'd be playing at my Birdland graduation would be the string bass, I'd have laughed out loud. I was a brass player, not a bass player.

When I took a Greyhound bus from Seattle to New York in January 1950, I carried a valve trombone with me. In the Army I had switched to that instrument from the baritone horn, which I had been playing since grade school. The baritone horn has a beautiful sound, but it wasn't considered to be a jazz instrument, and I wanted to play jazz.

I'd already made a good start. As a schoolboy in Kirkland, Washington, I had collected and memorized every jazz record I could get my hands on, and I had been jamming with friends in the Army and around Seattle. But at Birdland my education moved up to a new level. At that midtown New York nightclub, I heard modern jazz played nightly by the masters.

Birdland was billed as "The Jazz Corner of the World," even though its entrance was in the middle of the block on Broadway between Fifty-second and Fifty-third Streets. Morris Levy, the owner of the place, had announced its opening in August 1949, but he ran into some difficulty in securing the required licenses. Birdland finally opened on December 15, just three weeks before I arrived in town. To this twenty-two-year-old fresh from the hinterlands, it was a perfectly wonderful place.

I found it hard to wait each day until eight P.M., the hour that Birdland opened its doors. Then I would hurry inside and down the carpeted stairway. After a stop at the ticket window to pay the seventy-five-cent admission charge, I would descend the last half dozen steps into the club itself, where I would be greeted by either Drayton, the headwaiter, or Pee Wee Marquette, the midget master of ceremonies.

Patrons could choose from three sections at Birdland, depending on how much money they wanted to spend. On the right side of the club were booths along the wall and tables directly in front of the bandstand. Along the left wall was the bar. Between the bar and the left side of the bandstand, cordoned off by low wooden railings, was a section we called "the bleachers," with a long wooden bench at the rear and two or three rows of chairs in front of it. There was a cover charge and a food and drink menu in the table section, and if you stood at the bar you were expected to buy a drink. But in the bleachers, once having paid your admission, you were entitled to occupy a seat without further obligation. I sat there every night until they closed at four A.M.

Behind the bar were live birds in cages. The walls were covered with photo murals by Herman Leonard, done in the dramatic high-contrast style that was characteristic of his photography. Against jet black backgrounds, life-size action shots of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Lennie Tristano, and other modern jazzmen stood in sharp focus. The murals created an atmosphere that seemed just right for the home of modern jazz. A sign near the door said that the maximum legal occupancy was 273 people, but on weekends the place was often so crowded that I could barely squeeze into it.

Though Birdland was near Fifty-second Street, it wasn't one of the Fifty-second Street jazz clubs. Those "Swing Street" clubs had been farther east, crowded along both sides of the block between Fifth and Sixth avenues, with a few more in the next block toward Seventh. By the time I moved to New York, none of them were presenting jazz any more; they had all become Chinese restaurants or strip joints except the Hickory House, which still served great steaks, but had replaced its

live musicians with a disc-jockey. Fortunately for my future livelihood, that famous old restaurant went back to live music the following year.

In 1948, during a three-day pass from the Army, I had visited the Royal Roost near Duffy Square, where Dizzy Gillespie's big band opened my ears to the revolution that was going on in jazz, but when I returned in 1950 I found that the Roost had closed. Bop City, its successor a little farther up Broadway, was still operating, but it only lasted until the autumn of that year.

There were a few other midtown jazz clubs. A place on Eighth Avenue called Le Downbeat (not to be confused with the original Downbeat Club on Fifty-second Street) opened around that time, where the Barbara Carroll trio, with Joe Shulman on bass and Herb Wasserman on drums, appeared nightly opposite groups like the Billy Taylor Trio and the Oscar Pettiford Quartet. And a club called Snookie's on West Forty-fifth Street presented jazz for a few years. There were also jazz clubs uptown and in Greenwich Village, but it was Birdland, with its live radio broadcasts and its sponsorship of Symphony Sid's nightly programs featuring modern jazz records, that indeed became the "jazz corner of the world" in the 1950s. There, in the bleachers, I was able to literally sit at the feet of the masters of modern jazz.

When I first arrived at Birdland, Charlie Parker was leading a quintet there. It included pianist Bud Powell, drummer Roy Haynes, bassist Tommy Potter, and trumpeter Red Rodney. The house band that played opposite Bird's group had Max Roach on drums, Curly Russell on bass, and Al Haig on piano. It was hard to tell who the regular horn players were in that band because there was so much sitting in. I heard J. J. Johnson, Fats Navarro, Kenny Dorham, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Lucky Thompson, Milt Jackson, Sonny Stitt, and dozens of others. It seemed that every musician in modern jazz was playing at Birdland during my first few months in town.

The club was always full of musicians who came to listen. I recognized many famous ones from their pictures in *Down Beat* and *Metro-nome* magazines, and had others pointed out to me by jazz fans in the bleachers. Being among all those musicians and hearing all that wonderful music every night kept me in a constant state of bliss.

One evening while Bird's quintet was playing, a buzz of recognition preceded Art Tatum as he and a friend slipped into chairs right under the piano in the bleachers. Tatum had been the reigning master of the jazz piano for so long that some critics had begun to take his amazing ability for granted, declaring that Bud Powell was the new king of the keyboard.

Tatum wanted to hear what Bud was playing with Bird. He listened carefully and was complimentary when he was asked what he thought of Bud's playing. As Parker's band left the stand, they all came over to say hello to Tatum, and the musicians in the house band invited him to sit in. He felt his way up to the piano, and those of us who were sitting behind him could see that, as Art slid onto the piano bench, he sat down on his left hand. He did it as if by accident, but he kept that hand tucked under his ample rear end throughout the entire set. Art comped for the other players and took several brilliant solos using just his right hand.

Tatum may have been commenting on the sparse use Powell made of his left hand. Or he could have just been reminding himself that his own two-handed piano style was not currently in fashion at Birdland. Whatever his reasons, Art Tatum let the kids in the bleachers see that he could still play better with one hand than most pianists could play with two.

## *chapter 2*

# The Big Town

I had two brief flirtations with New York City before I moved east to stay. There was that three-day pass from the Army in 1948, and an earlier visit in 1945, after my youthful love of the theater brought me to Massachusetts at the end of my senior year in high school. I won a summer scholarship to the Priscilla Beach Theater in Plymouth, and my parents scraped together the money for my train fare from Seattle. I lived all summer in an old Victorian house at Priscilla Beach with seventy-five or eighty other young actors and actresses from all over the country. We studied theater crafts during the day and put on plays at night in a barn theater. Our training was supervised and our plays were directed by two impressive New York thespians, Dr. A. Franklin Trask and his wife, Allison Hawley.

My brother Bob, four years my senior, had been in the Navy since 1942, serving as a fire controlman on the destroyer *Mackenzie* throughout the North African and Italian campaigns of World War II. A deck gun on his ship misfired during the Normandy invasion, blowing off all his clothes and knocking him unconscious. When he recovered, he was transferred to the submarine service, and he was stationed at the sub base in New London, Connecticut, while I was at Priscilla Beach.

Bob came to visit me one weekend at the end of that summer. The war in the Pacific had just ended, and he was looking forward to being discharged from the Navy. When I told him that I was about ready to go home to Kirkland, he said, "You can't leave without seeing New York. It's the greatest place in the world."

"But how would I get there? I'm broke. All I have is my ticket home."

"Is it a Pullman ticket?"

"Yes."

"Then it's easy. Cash it in and buy a coach ticket from New York to Seattle. It won't kill you to sleep sitting up for a few nights. You'll have enough money left over to go down to New York and see the sights before you go home."

It was a great idea. As soon as my summer as an actor was over, I took a bus from Boston to New York, carrying in my pocket a railroad coach ticket to Seattle and about twenty-five dollars in cash.

My only knowledge of the big city came from Hollywood movies and stories by Damon Runyon. I knew a few place names like Times Square and Coney Island, but I didn't know uptown from downtown and had no idea how to find the music I wanted to hear. The information I needed was probably in *Down Beat* magazine, but I hadn't heard of that publication yet.

Bob had told me there were dime lockers at Pennsylvania Station where I could park my suitcase. I walked from the old West Side bus station on Forty-second Street to the IND subway and, for a nickel, took a train (the A Train!) to Pennsylvania Station, one stop away, where I locked up my suitcase. Then I found another train to Times Square.

In those days, that neighborhood, where Broadway cuts across the intersection of Seventh Avenue and Forty-second Street, was a carnival of entertainment. The brightly lit marquees of the giant movie theaters north of Times Square announced their programs with lighted signs and banners that rose several stories high. I was amazed to discover that there were name bands on stage at most of them! I hadn't known that live music would be so available to a seventeen-year-old. I spent nearly a whole dollar to get into the Strand, where I sat through a dull

movie twice in order to hear two shows by the Charlie Barnet band, with Al Killian playing lead trumpet and Peanuts Holland taking the jazz solos.

Afterwards, I reeled happily over to the Nedick's on the corner and had an exotic supper of hot dogs and papaya juice. Then I went back to Thirty-fourth Street to the Sloane House YMCA, where Bob had told me I could find cheap lodging. For twenty-five cents, Sloane House gave me a cot with clean sheets and a locker for my clothes. Though I was shy about undressing in a dormitory full of strangers, I slept soundly and awoke early, eager to see everything.

After spending the morning exploring the city by subway, I took advantage of the reduced daytime prices at the movie palaces and heard every band that was playing. I saw Tommy Dorsey at the Paramount with Dick Haymes, Paul Whiteman at the Capitol, Johnny "Scat" Davis's band at Loew's State, and the Condos Brothers and Connee Boswell at the Roxy. I even went to hear Henry Busse's band at the RKO Keith's. I thought his hit record of "Hot Lips" was corny, but it was a chance to see and hear another live band. They surprised me. Busse had modern arrangements and a band full of young musicians who were blowing like mad. Only "Hot Lips" was played with the wa-wa mute and shuffle-rhythm beat that was his trademark.

In the evenings I checked out the jazz in the bars around Times Square: the Circus Bar in the Piccadilly Hotel; the Metropole, which was then on the corner of Forty-eighth Street and Seventh Avenue; and the Aquarium on Forty-seventh Street. I was afraid to go into the Zanzibar, on Broadway, where Duke Ellington's band and Nat Cole were playing. The prices weren't posted outside, and I feared financial embarrassment. For the same reason, I skipped the 400 Club, where Dorsey's band was playing at night.

I had heard something about jazz on Fifty-second Street, but when I walked up Broadway to Fifty-second one afternoon, I only found a ballroom and some auto dealerships. I looked up the block in both directions, but saw no nightclubs. The Hickory House just looked like a restaurant; there was no sign outside to indicate that they had music. It never occurred to me to look farther east. Surely all the nightlife would be near Broadway, the "main stem." I decided that the Fifty-second Street clubs must have belonged to an earlier era, and abandoned my search. By doing so, I missed all the jazz that was being played two blocks farther east, and also missed the chance to discover Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie two years earlier than I eventually did.

The Commodore Record Shop on Forty-second Street near Grand Central Station was easier to find since the address was on their record label. In those days every record shop had booths where you could listen to the merchandise before buying. After a few hours of happy browsing at the Commodore, I got about a dozen records that weren't available at home at MacDougall's Electric Store in Kirkland: Louis Armstrong, Edmond Hall, Jack Teagarden, Frankie Newton, Bill Coleman, Art Tatum, etc. When I told Milt Gabler, the owner of the Commodore, how far I was taking the fragile ten-inch discs, he packed them for me in a carton with a sheet of corrugated boxboard between each record.

I ventured to Greenwich Village one night and found Nick's and Cafe Society Downtown. I didn't like the taste of beer, but I stood nursing one in Nick's for a while, listening to Miff Mole's band. I was afraid to go into Cafe Society. Art Tatum and Billie Holiday were there, but the club looked expensive, and I was sure I wouldn't have enough money. I stood in the doorway and listened to Tatum for a while, but I left when the maitre d' gave me a dirty look.

When I got back to Sloane House I was told that it was full that night. The fleet was in. But the lady at the desk said, "Don't worry, son. We have other locations that we've inspected and approved."

Their free jitney took me down to the St. Mark's Baths in the East Village. It was a Russian bathhouse on St. Mark's Place near Third Avenue, in what was then a Slavic neighborhood. Twenty-five cents bought me a dormitory bed, a locker for my clothes, a safe deposit box for my valuables, and the use of their steam room and pool. For another fifteen cents I could have had a shave, but I didn't have any whiskers yet.

When I walked outside in the morning I was lost until I saw the Third Avenue El at the corner. I knew it crossed Forty-second Street, so, saving the fare, I walked uptown under the elevated tracks until I was back in familiar territory. I broke my last dollar bill for some breakfast and decided it was time to go home.

*chapter 3*

## Home, School, and the Army

Except for my first two months in the Army, I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't making music. Though my mom, Lucile, didn't care for jazz, I have her to thank for my ears and my early musical training. She had a lovely soprano voice and sang regularly in our church, in local operettas, and on local radio programs in Seattle. She even got fan mail. I remember one letter, addressed to "Lou Seal Crow," that said, "I just love your voice, Mrs. Crow. It is so nice and shrill."

Mom taught singers and elementary piano students at home. She only charged a dollar or two for a lesson, but it helped us eke out a living during the Depression when my dad, Harry, a carpenter, was having trouble finding work. When I was just a tot, I started singing along. She would play a phrase for a student to repeat, and then she would have to wait until I sang it, too, from my crib in the bedroom.

Mom's big upright Holland piano was our home entertainment center. Brother Bob and I took turns making interesting noises at the keyboard whenever Mom wasn't teaching, and in the evenings we all sang while she played. I learned the popular songs of World War I, all of the Methodist hymnal, some Gilbert and Sullivan, and the songs of Carrie Jacobs Bond. At church socials and public gatherings I was introduced to patriotic music and the songs of Victor Herbert and Irving Berlin.

We owned an old Edison windup phonograph and about a dozen records. I remember a cello rendition of "The Swan," several vaudeville numbers including two songs by Sir Harry Lauder, and arias sung by a tenor. The singers all sounded like they were closed up in a tin box. When we were able to afford a secondhand Atwater Kent table radio, I began to learn, from the musical programs being broadcast, the work of songwriters like Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and De Silva, Brown and Henderson, as well as operatic and symphonic music.

Realizing that I had an ear for music, Mom began teaching me songs.

I can remember singing with her as she ironed the weekly wash, when my head wasn't as high as her ironing board. Everyone sang in those days, in church, at American Legion meetings, in school, at parties, and at home. Even Dad sang, though his interest in music was limited to the songs of Stephen Foster and "Home on the Range."

I studied piano with Mom until, in the fourth grade, I heard they were forming a school band and decided I would rather play the trumpet. After some questioning about my willingness to practice, Dad got out the Sears, Roebuck catalog and turned to the musical instrument section. There was a brass trumpet, complete with a mouthpiece and a cardboard case, for \$9.95. The depression had hit them hard and there was no cash in the house, but my folks sent away for that trumpet.

Al Bennest, our school music teacher, lived on my block. One day he saw me passing his house and beckoned to me. He said, "I want you to hear something," and led me into his living room, where he took a record out of its paper sleeve and put it on his Victrola. It was the first time I had seen flat records. Our Edison phonograph used cylindrical records that took up a lot of storage space. I considered flat phonograph records a wonder of modern science. When the record began to play, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues." His opening cadenza changed my whole conception of what a trumpet should sound like, and made me realize that jazz was something special.

I played the trumpet for another year, trying to sound like Louis, but no matter how hard I practiced, I couldn't play high enough to cut the first parts in the grade school band. My folks got me a better horn, but that didn't help. When I took my problem to Mr. Bennest, he looked in my mouth and said:

"The way your front teeth sit, you may never be able to develop a good trumpet embouchure. But I have an idea. The school owns a baritone horn that no one is playing. It has a beautiful sound and a bigger mouthpiece. It might fit your teeth better. I used to play the baritone myself. The fingering is just like a trumpet, and it has all the most beautiful parts in the concert band. Why don't you take it home and see if you like it?"

I was doubtful. I had never heard of a baritone horn. But if Mr. Bennest had played one, I was willing to try it. When I got used to it, I liked it a lot, and within another year I was playing it pretty well. My dad returned the new trumpet and got his money back.

In junior high school I began to realize that some of our band ar-