

Chapter 1

The Day Duke Died

While the essays in this memoir could be sequenced in a variety of ways, Taylor designated “The Day Duke Died” to be the opening chapter, and it was the first essay he began writing in order to consider whether he would prepare an autobiography. In correspondence with his close friend and former Sarah Lawrence College faculty member poet Alastair Reid, he makes reference to “starting on the Ellington episode to see what it turns out to be.”¹ The chapter was never officially completed, and the original draft includes different versions. Yet, as the most unstructured chapter among the collection, “The Day Duke Died” may best represent Taylor’s vision for this publication and, I suspect, would have become the pattern for subsequent chapters, capturing the unfolding narrative style that he sought with nonchronological reveries meandering in various directions and then concluding with personal insights.

Taylor’s friendship with Duke Ellington began in 1939 when the Ellington band found themselves idle in England due to the (British) Musician’s Union ban on performances by American instrumentalists.² Taylor spent a week showing Ellington around London. Jazz was much more than a mere avocation for Taylor, and his decision to pursue a life as an academic and then college president can be placed in juxtaposition with his achievements as a clarinetist and music critic. Taylor noted that playing jazz could have as easily become a career since, as he later recalled, “a Canadian musician with an American style could do quite well in London” during the 1930s.³

The specific anecdote in this chapter about Taylor’s own level of playing may not accurately indicate his abilities and, most likely, was included in jest. Taylor once mentioned to me that Ellington, on another occasion, said that

while he would not have been hired as a band member, he would have been invited to sit in on post-performance jam sessions. Taylor's role as a music critic should not go unnoticed. After the completion of his doctorate in philosophy at University of London, he served as full-time news editor and columnist for the British jazz magazine *The Melody Maker* (at what he described as an exorbitant salary for the times), and his writings are cited in the professional musicological literature as recently as 2015.⁴

Taylor begins "*The Day Duke Died*" by describing Ellington's funeral on Memorial Day, May 27, 1974, and throughout the chapter affirms his belief in the importance of open-ended, improvisatory experience as a fundamental aspect of learning in what will become a reoccurring motif for the entire memoir.

We drove in the rain of a spring day in 1974 in a cortege of black limousines through the streets of Harlem, past the Apollo, past Duke's old apartment on St. Nicholas, on a last trip with Duke through a territory drenched in the memories of where he had been and what he had done. The people in the streets turned to look at the cortege and the carloads of flowers, without knowing it was Ellington on the way to his funeral. When we arrived at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, there were ten thousand people inside and another ten thousand in the rain on the streets. It was an open-hearted, full-scale celebration of Duke's life and his art, a ceremony in honor of a composer who wrote some of the greatest music ever to come out of the United States.

The religious dimension was as big as the universe and as intimate as a family. The love in the cathedral was palpable—Black and white Americans in a cathedral built for whites, believers and nonbelievers united by a religion of humanity and the universal brotherhood of musicians, dancers, singers, and artists. Ellington would have loved it and the gathering of loving people, the singing and playing of those who knew his music best. Ray Nance played "Take the A Train," slow as a dirge; Ella Fitzgerald sang "Solitude"; McHenry Boatwright sang "The Lord's Prayer"; Joe Williams sang and Earl Hines, Mary Lou Williams, Jo Jones, Billy Taylor, and others played; Pastor John Gensel and Stanley Dance talked about him; and Duke was carried out of the Cathedral to the haunting sound of Johnny Hodges, Alice Babs, and the Ellington band playing music from his first *Sacred Concert*.

It was a funeral that at moments reached the level of high theater; it was also an event that could never have taken place anywhere else except to honor so protean a genius in a country whose cultural and aesthetic character he had helped to shape. The sounds and rhythms he made in tobacco barns, convention halls, dance halls, palaces, theaters,

night clubs, churches, cathedrals, parks, and concert halls went around the world. The impulses he set in motion changed the sound of the world from Moscow to Buenos Aires.

The service was in essence a union of the sacred and the profane, and what Duke held sacred was music and a transformation of the meaning of the profane and the sacred in religion and in art. It was a satin doll in church, African paganism among the Episcopalians and Lutherans. For Duke there was nothing profane in the whole of life except wars and violence, wars between persons and lack of forgiveness, respect, and kindness. For him, the good and the bad were natural conditions to be dealt with, and he accepted life as it came, as a sacred gift from a benevolent and fair-minded God in whom he believed. What he held most sacred was music and the mission of the artist who must give himself up to his art, and in so doing, to praise God and to worship in the artist's own way. That was his mode of worship. He liked the story of the little juggler of Notre Dame who crept into the cathedral at midnight and performed his juggling before the altar as the greatest gift he had to give. Writing and playing music were his mode of worship, his sacred music as part of the history of religious art.

Everything Ellington touched, saw, heard, and lived went into his music, and the sound of it when he listened gave back to him the affirmation for his life. It was not a self-conscious or cloistered dedication; it was just that he went through the world composing and playing, and that's what he did with his time, night and day. He was almost incapable of walking past a piano and leaving it alone. Since his orchestra was the instrument through which he composed, he couldn't live without it. And in the midst of a total dedication to his art, he stood back and looked at himself with a cool eye and never forgot that he was a piano player with a band that had to do one-night stands. Until the very last days of his life, he was still doing them.

Gordon Parks was once driving with Harry Carney and Duke overnight from Los Angeles to San Francisco, with Duke asleep in the back seat.⁵ As they came into San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge lay ahead of them and seemed to be floating in the early morning mist. Harry woke up Duke to tell him that here was something marvelous that he might want to write about, since he wrote about almost everything he saw. Duke rubbed his eyes, took a look and mumbled, "Majestic. Majestic. Goddam those white people are smart," and went back to sleep.



He had been laid out in his coffin for two days at Walter Cooke's Funeral Home on Third Avenue, from 8:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., just inside the door, fifteen feet from the sidewalk. Fifteen thousand people from uptown and downtown came by, friends and strangers, dancers, musicians, actors, and admirers gathered in little knots on the street to talk. He looked elegant and at ease in his blue pleated shirt and evening clothes. "I never saw him looking better," said one of the musicians. I saw a lot of him during those two days, since I went with his sister Ruth and the family to two funeral services by the Masons and the Shriners held in his room at the funeral home. It was not a large room, and there was an intimacy and an affectionate simplicity about the ritual as the Black brothers in their uniform spoke of brother Edward.

It was a time to think about the meaning of death, Ellington's death and everyone's. The meaning for those in the room that day was that God had given Edward Ellington life and the gifts to go with it and now God had seen fit to call him away. Not a bad explanation, and you could feel the power and comfort in the metaphor. Seventy-five years of a life had been lived to the full by a man who welcomed everything in it, and now that it was over, Edward and everyone else could rejoice in the fact that he was around so long and had done so much with his time.

I discovered as I looked into his face at Cooke's that a whole section of who I was, what I thought, what I felt about being alive at all went back to Ellington. Like the men in the Ellington band, you were never the same after you came close to him. You played and thought differently; he released something that made it possible to do whatever you did better and in ways you hadn't thought of. When Jimmy Hamilton came into the band with his rich classical clarinet tone, Duke didn't try to change Jimmy into something more like Barney Bigard. He simply wrote for Jimmy and gave him a chance to do things he had never done before. With one bar of single notes or one chord, Duke could set off the band, and nobody could create the rhythmic surge that he set up when he was the piano player. He led simply by being present and by playing.

His was a special kind of easy leadership, the kind only possible in one who is fully in touch with his own talent and who goes through the world admiring the talents and qualities of others, secure in the confidence of their admiration of his. When he wrote music, he was giving his musicians through the notes he put down a guide for making the sounds he and they wanted to hear. He gave them the mood and set the structure in which they could operate. He knew what each of

the musicians could do and the special quality that each possessed, and he took them farther out in their own direction. He wrote to turn them loose and to make new forms in the total sound of the orchestra. He wrote what he wanted to write for people who wanted to listen. It was intuitive writing, learned through the discipline of having to turn out songs and production numbers for dancers and audiences, reaching out through the manuscript to the intuitions of the players whose ideas would reemerge in the works he later composed. It was as if he were giving a set of directions for the release of enormous energies which his players and listeners could find within themselves.

He worked with the band the way Martha Graham worked with her company. For Martha, right from the beginning, her dancers were the instrument through which she said what she had to say. They danced the way she taught them to and, as she worked in composition, the response of their bodies to the ideas she was developing gave her new forms of expression for those ideas. In both Ellington and Graham, the creative act had been one of controlled improvisation. In Ellington's case, he carried the art of improvisation in composing and playing to such heights that he could compose on his recording dates in those famous sessions when, with a few scraps of manuscript, a few lead sheets and a little help from Billy Strayhorn, he simply told the brass and reeds what he wanted, gave them some notes, and went on from there.

It is the special genius of the greatest and most original of our American artists that they are so intensely personal in creating their own styles—the jazz forms of Ellington, the dance theater of Graham, the musical theater of Rodgers and Hammerstein, the songs of Cole Porter, the sculpture of David Smith, the painting of Jackson Pollock. Ellington made it all as he went along, through scores for films, opera, musical comedy, sacred music, ballet, symphony orchestras, and above all for the Ellington orchestra. For him, these were not so much perilous tests as a series of affirmations of his belief in the power of his own music. He was an original in a time of originators, and he inherited the buoyancy and comradeship of the early jazz players.



His recording sessions were often like family parties to which the musicians, family, and close friends were all invited. Ellington at the piano was in the middle with the brass, the rhythm section, and the reeds grouped

around him, then a circle including Billy Strayhorn, Duke's sister Ruth and his nephews Michael and Stephen James, band librarian Tom Whaley, record company and studio staff people, jazz writer Stanley Dance, the Reverend John Gensel, Duke's doctor Arthur Logan, musicians who were in town and had heard about the session, and friends who always knew from Ruth or Duke when he was recording. In a special sense, we were all part of the session. There was an excitement in the studio that Duke generated, in the band and in the rest of us, an expectation that something important was about to happen, although no one knew quite what, including Ellington. Then the music started to flow, and the excitement he had created came through to all of us and flowed back to him. There was something of the same effect when he entered any roomful of people, or walked into the Stage Deli, or sat around at his sister's place, or talked to you in a dressing room with his head in a bandanna and his body in a towel, or stood beside the president in a receiving line at the White House. Something started to happen that wasn't there before. You could feel the beat.

The image of the recording session with Duke at the center and the rest of us grouped around him was a metaphor for the way he lived his life, with the musicians close at hand and his friends in a surrounding circle, or, in real life, in a series of circles. Each of us had his own relation to Ellington and somehow in the crowded life he led he found ways of keeping those relations intact. He knew how to shut himself away from everyone when he wanted to write, but he could write wherever he was and no matter who was around—on trains and planes, in cars, restaurants, hotel rooms and dressing rooms. After his performances, after the people who came to his dressing room had left, after the closer friends had gone home, he often wrote until morning.

It meant that you had to be prepared for some long nights if you were going to see him, and I missed a great deal of time with him simply because I had to be president of a college in the morning. He would suddenly think of you at three or four a.m. and telephone from wherever he was. He called one very early morning. "I've just thought of something. It's a musical about some cat who's president of a women's college. There he is with all these beautiful chicks, and he falls in love with a lady policeman who's come to the college to investigate a burglary. The curtain goes up. One of the beautiful chicks is sitting in the corner on a bare stage holding a glass of water. That's all I've got. How do you like it so far?"



In the spring of 1939, the Ellington band booked a European tour and turned up in London on the way home. By this time I had been living in England for three years, two of them doing a doctorate at the University of London, a third as news editor of a weekly musicians' newspaper, *The Melody Maker*. Since Ellington and the band had a week's time on their hands, I assigned reporters and photographers to cover them and spent most of the week with Duke, Rex Stuart and Harry Carney, and some of the others, showing them around London.⁶ Duke was intrigued with the idea of hanging around with a twenty-four-year-old doctor of philosophy who played the clarinet and edited a newspaper, especially after I told him that I probably wouldn't have been any of those things if it hadn't been for him. We became friends for the rest of his life.

In the fall after that English spring, Ellington brought the band through Madison, Wisconsin, to play at the university where by that time I had gone to do my first teaching in philosophy. Billy Strayhorn was traveling with the band then, after Duke had heard some of Billy's lyrics



Rex Stewart, trumpeter in the Ellington band, Taylor, and Harry Carney, baritone saxophonist in the Ellington band, 1939. Courtesy of the Taylor family.

and music in Pittsburgh and invited him to join up.⁷ Billy still wasn't sure what he was to do except help with the arranging. In fact he spent the rest of his life finding out what he and Duke could do together. The two of them were close as brothers and were a pair of creative artists who learned to work so closely together that often you could not tell where Duke's music stopped and Billy's began. So extraordinary was their collaboration that they were both greater individual artists because of it than either would have been alone.

While the band was playing that first night at the University of Wisconsin, Billy and I listened and talked. He told me about his own music and what he had written for musical comedy, and about what he wanted to do with his life. We compared notes on the deep effect of the Ellington band and Duke the first time we heard them in person. I told Billy about playing second clarinet in the University of Wisconsin's symphony, and about why I had left England to come to Wisconsin, about philosophy and what I was teaching my students. We were two young men starting out in careers which had involved us with Ellington, and we found that we were both in the grip of the Ellington influence. We weren't too sure what that was, except that when you were with him, some very funny things were said. There was absolutely no pretense in the room. You learned the meaning of the words "elegance and genius," and everything seemed to go much better, whatever it was.

Strayhorn then and every day until he died was gracious, delightful, gentle, and incredibly talented. Billy was small and bound in size, about the size of Truman Capote, and I don't believe he was capable of entertaining a harmful or mean-handed thought. He looked at you from behind his horn-rimmed glasses with kindness in his eyes. He never raised his voice. As Duke said, "his patience was incomparable and unlimited." More than anything else, aside from his contribution as a composer and lyricist, it was Billy's natural, generous capacity for friendship and affectionate companionship that made his presence so important an element in everything Ellington and the band did. They called him Swee' Pea because of that, after the character in Popeye. With his shy, gentle smile he was practically unflappable, and he had a lot to do with keeping Duke in balance and the band in a reasonable state of mind. He loved hanging around with musicians. When you wanted to contact him during the late afternoon or evening, he took his calls at a bar where he knew musicians would come by. He was himself a character out of an unwritten musical comedy. When he died in 1967,

years and years too soon, we lost a whole section of musical heritage that was still to come.

When the band came back to Madison each year to play at the local theater, Duke, Billy, Rex Stewart, Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges, and whoever else was around after the last performance came out to an old barn which, with the help of my students and friends on the faculty, we had converted into a house with an enormous living room. We played and ate and talked until it was time for the band to catch the early morning train to Chicago. One year after Duke and Rex Stewart and I had been playing “C Jam Blues,” a friend from the university psychology department asked Duke what he thought of my clarinet playing. “We’ve heard Taylor around here for a year or two and he sounds all right, but how would you rate him with the members of your band.”

Duke looked down at the fireplace, let three beats go by, and said, “Harold is beyond category. He has such impeccable taste and so many beautiful ideas in his head that he refuses to play them because he doesn’t think his playing can capture the true beauty of his ideas. He is at his ultimate best when he is silent.”



Then the war came and I didn’t see Duke until the spring of 1945 when I first went to Sarah Lawrence to talk to the people there about the presidency of the college. Duke was in town playing at what was then the 400 Club. I had spent two days at the college and was in a fair amount of doubt about being a college president at all. I was by that time deeply involved in what we were doing at the University of Wisconsin. I loved the place and the life there. I loved teaching, I had many close friends, I admired my colleagues, and I was serious about my work as a teacher and scholar. My conception of college presidents was that except for Bob Hutchins, Clarence Dykstra, James Conant,⁸ and one or two others, they were all business managers, politicians, anti-intellectuals, public relations experts, fund-raisers—the hired servants of the middle class.

I went down to the 400 Club. Rex [Stewart] played “Boy Meets Horn,” and Duke came over after the first set. I told him why I was in New York and what was bothering me about the possibility of leaving Wisconsin. Duke said, “Sweetie, take the gig if they want to book you. I’m out in Wisconsin once a year. It’s a nice place to visit but this is where everything lives and where I am when I’m not away. I hear those

cats have a beautiful college. I've got a lot of good friends, but I don't have a college president and I think I need one."

In the years after that, Duke did come up to the college when he could. Rex Stewart often put together a group with musicians like Cozy Cole, J. C. Higginbotham, Vic Dickenson, Buster Bailey, and John Bunch who came up to Sarah Lawrence to play Sunday afternoon concerts for the students and their friends. One night Duke visited and played for the students and, when it was time for the clarinet, I played an A to tune to the piano. Duke hit four A's on the piano in tempo and said, "Hold it, Prez," and then, turning to the audience, still hitting the A, he said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Duke Ellington Duo proudly presents the world premiere of Sonata on A, featuring the piano player and the Prez." He then did a brilliant sixty-four bars of chord changes, key changes, and tempo changes while conducting me to hold the A.



Duke first came into my life when I was fourteen although I did not enter his until nearly ten years later. I had just begun learning to play the clarinet by listening to records and the radio and by playing in the Sunday school orchestra. I had never heard anything like the Ellington band and Barney Bigard's clarinet, and the first time I heard them I knew that this was the kind of music I wanted to play.

When the band came to Toronto where I grew up, I went to the theater early and sat enthralled, waiting for Ellington. The stage was lit by soft blue lights, and from behind the curtain came the Ellington sounds with a quiet and steady beat which gradually grew in intensity and volume until the curtain parted and there was a stage full of Black musicians in white evening clothes with Sonny Greer high up in his nest of drums and cymbals, his head turning from side to side, his eyes half-closed, with the air of a man possessed by music.

Then Ellington walked on stage in his elegant black evening clothes with a frilled shirt and a collar that rolled an inch above his coat. The effect of the whole thing was staggering. I felt that I was in the presence of history and that characters I had read about and heard about had come to life before my eyes. The music they played, now that I was hearing it in person without the tinny sounds of the 1920s' radio and records, was strange, wild, and intense. The men in the band brought with them intimations of a sophisticated Black world of night

people where things went on that the rest of the world did not know about. Their very blackness held a mysterious quality. They didn't try to be entertaining with all the chuckling and eye-rolling that people were used to in the 1920s. Hodges was sinister and a little intimidating. Harry Carney rolled out his beautiful big tones in the manner of a concert cellist. Ellington was charming, witty, at ease, and in full command of the band and the audience. I waited at the stage door an hour before he came out. He was gracious and smiling, he asked what I played, and when I said clarinet, he said, "Keep blowing, son. Someday it'll start to play pretty."

There were very few jazz musicians in Toronto when I was a boy and, like other hardline Methodists in Canada, my family thought of jazz and dance halls as horrifying parts of a sinful world. In fact, there were few parts of the world that they didn't find sinful, and to protect me against it they didn't allow my sister or me to go to movies or to play card games or even parcheesi since it was played with dice. We had a family regimen of going to church three times on Sunday and once a week to prayer meeting. It was all right to play hymns in the Sunday school orchestra and to learn the Weber Clarinet Concerto and the exercises, but there was to be no jazz.

From the day I heard the band and met Ellington, all that changed. There was something about the way Duke did what he wanted to do with such grace and certainty—playing music that no one else could write, using stage lighting, wah-wah mutes, band uniforms, and soloists who came to the front of the band to play, two clarinets and a muted trombone for "Mood Indigo," making the band on stage into a piece of theater—all this gave me a sense of purpose. It was a sense that even as a fourteen-year-old who couldn't play the clarinet very well and had never played in a jazz band, if I kept blowing it every day the clarinet would start to play pretty.

After a while it did, and I discovered that it was possible not to go to church if I simply announced to my parents that I was not going except to play in the Sunday school orchestra, and that if I thought of myself the way Ellington did, I could become a musician and hang around with other musicians. That meant that I lived in a different world from the others. It was the difference between the square world which did as it was told and the inner company of artists who played a special kind of music with its own romantic heroes, who stayed up all night, left school, drank whiskey and gin, smoked reefers, hung around

with beautiful and available women, died young, and were more like poets than regular people, with a special vocabulary and a nonchalant way of talking and thinking. I joined the underground while keeping my place in the square world of school and the Canadian family. For the first time in my life, I knew what it meant to be an artist. My deepest regret was that I had not been born Black.

I found four others who wanted to join the underground, and we organized a band. My mother and father hated it but let us rehearse in the living room, and little by little we began to be invited to play at high school dances and parties given by friends. We had a great advantage in the fact that we didn't charge very much, usually whatever our sponsors could pay. We bought the standard orchestrations of popular tunes, and at first I played the trumpet parts on clarinet until we found a trumpet player, at which point I branched out and borrowed the money from my father to buy an alto saxophone.

Then we found a pianist with perfect pitch and an acute musical memory who could listen to a tune once on the radio and dictate the melody line and the chords. I would then write out the parts for the trumpet and alto sax. The guitarist who doubled on violin already had the chords and the lead sheet, and the drummer didn't need anything. Because of his marvelous ear and memory, the pianist could imitate anyone from Eddy Duchin to Earl Hines just by listening to their records.

It was a simple step from there to learn how to listen and to copy out the parts from Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, or Chick Webb, and from there to start writing simple arrangements for the band and to develop a style of our own. I had taken to hitchhiking down to New York for a week during school vacation to hear whoever was playing. I found that I could rent a room for \$5.00 a week and live on porridge, oranges, bananas, and milk and have enough money left over to pay the cover charge or the general admission.

I was learning to be a musician by being one. To compose meant either writing down notes the way you write down a poem and then playing the notes on an instrument, or reading and playing what someone else had written while learning to understand the structure and sound of the music of other composers. There was no great mystery in the creative act. Once I knew what I wanted to hear, I wrote it out. While a nuisance to have to write out parts for ten to twenty other people, there was no other way of letting them know what I had in mind. It was like sending a telegram asking someone to meet you at a certain place

and time. After I got used to the vocabulary of notes, keys, and chords, I could imagine the sounds in my head without having to play them on an instrument. I simply sat down and wrote out a score.

But most of all I learned by listening. I could tell the authentic music, the natural tone, the inspired burst of improvisation by letting myself be influenced and taught by the masters of the instruments. It was not so much that our local musicians in Canada tried to imitate American jazz players directly. It was that the Americans set the standards for style and performance which we believed in and did our best to meet. They had cast a spell, and we were gladly under it. To feel the music coursing through your whole body, reaching a serene state in which you have control of your instrument and what you are playing while at the same time feeling yourself lifted and moved by something in the instrument and the music itself. Like our American counterparts we had close ties to each other and were quick to recognize each other's talents and to help each other the way the older generation of pianists helped Ellington learn how to play by ear when he was growing up in Washington. In Toronto we were in some sense pioneers. There had been nobody there before us.

Bill Clifton was our young pianist who had more talent than most and would be picked up and carried off to the Paul Whiteman Orchestra and Benny Goodman band. He was handsome, tall, sat very straight at the piano, and was one of the most severe critics and demanding performers I had ever met. I was impressed by the fact that even when he was most broke he refused to play with some of the orchestras around Toronto because he couldn't stand their banal style or he thought the drummer had no beat. Bill applied his own standards to the Whiteman and Goodman bands and at one point had a classic feud with Goodman over the beat he was keeping in the rhythm section. He felt that both Lionel Hampton and Gene Krupa were rushing the beat when they got too enthusiastic. Goodman thought that Bill was slowing down. The perfectionist element in Bill's character made him hard to live with. He also found it hard to live with himself.⁹

What I had learned from Bill when we were beginning to play seriously in Toronto was that no matter how informal, spontaneous, and free jazz sounded, the spontaneity and the freedom came from having full command of the instrument and full knowledge of the materials of jazz. If I was going to be able to improvise, I needed to listen to the masters of improvisation and to practice constantly. It was not unlike

William James's set of rules for making a lecture in philosophy—you read everything there is to read on the subject, discipline yourself by asking what it is you want to say, and write it out in notes. Then, after having been properly immersed and prepared, you leave your notes behind, walk into the lecture hall, and talk freely about what you know.

I was also learning about improvisation and the way I could be influenced and taught by listening to records and broadcasts. I set up a schedule for myself of two hours a day for improvising on the blues and the standard jazz tunes. In class at school I found myself playing tunes in my head and improvising imaginary solos. Some nights in bed I was rendered sleepless for hours by the silent improvisations I was playing and the imagined backgrounds the band was playing behind me.



From the start I made no separation between higher and lower forms of music in playing a Brahms clarinet quintet with four string players or the clarinet part in “Royal Garden Blues” with a jazz band. It was all music. The composers were different, the origins of their ideas were different, so were the oral traditions out of which they came, but they all had the same problem—the problem of writing down notes that would let the musicians know what they wanted to hear them play. For jazz composers and players there was merely a difference in the degree of rhythmic intensity, in the tone produced on the instrument, in the style of phrasing, and in the degree of freedom to give to collective or solo improvisation.

The classical composers, except for an occasional cadenza, held you firmly in hand, gave you room in performance for modest differences in tempo and phrasing, and the tradition of your instrument told you how the notes should sound. The jazz composers gave you fewer notes and a lot of room to improvise. Again, the tradition of your instrument told you how the notes should sound. But even here there was much more room for personal style and mutual influence. Pee Wee Russell's clarinet was plaintive and tinged with melancholy in the ballads he played, and it was unmistakably Russell. Barney Bigard had his own sound and style. So did Jimmy Hamilton, Sidney Bechet's soprano, Johnny Hodges's alto, Cootie Williams's trumpet. You could choose to be yourself with your own kind of music as long as you had something to say.



Taylor at Sarah Lawrence with Maxine Sullivan, a leading jazz vocalist of the 1930s, and Art Lund, singer with the Benny Goodman and Harry James bands, early 1950s. Gary Gladstone, courtesy of Sarah Lawrence College.

That idea of individual character could be carried over very easily into life in general. Once I reached a sense of confidence that I could work things out in my own way, I could choose to be myself with no need to be like anyone else or even to be what I was brought up to be. I had absolved myself from the need for approval. The freedom and joy I found in the life of a musician opened up an entire area of new experience, and I was never the same the rest of my life. I knew that whatever else happened to me, I could always make my way as a musician, and I would always find people wherever I went who loved Beethoven and Ellington. I had made a sudden entry into a new world of friends who were out there waiting for me everywhere. I also knew that I had found a whole new self and that I really was becoming the kind of person I wanted to be.