

**LIVING THE JAZZ LIFE: CONVERSATIONS WITH FORTY MUSICIANS ABOUT THEIR CAREERS IN JAZZ**, by W Royal Stokes. Oxford University Press, New York. ISBN 0-19-508108-0, hb, photos, x + 277 pp.

**Reviewed by J Lester Clare\***

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*[This book review appeared in JazzChord, Oct/Nov 01.]*

Allow us some levity with the multi-barreled American name. When we think of Garner Ted Armstrong, William F Buckley Jr, James Lincoln Collier, and of course the inestimable Professor Herman J Pipesucker, we tend to expect pomposity, bombast, superciliousness. What to make of W Royal Stokes, who sounds like the winning hand in an obscure card game? I've got a flush: top that! Damn, a Royal Stokes! You've been cheatin'! No-one calls me a cheat! Reach, hombre!

Enough. Bill or Wally or Wilbur Stokes (we'll never know) is the reverse of all that, distinguished above all by friendliness of tone and humility. Unlike this reviewer, Stokes is a practically invisible author. What he has done is to allow his subjects, 40 of them in all - mostly jazz artists but also blues people and vaudevillians - to tell their stories; then, with invisible crafts he has edited them. Invisible also is the astute, sympathetic interrogation.



*Nat Adderley: W Royal Stokes has him remembering Cannonball...*

Stokes has grouped his interviews in categories such as musical families, strings (snaring a violinist and a harpist in this net), pianists, composers, etc. The categorization was at first of only mild interest to me. More impressive was the sheer range across and within categories. The family interviews include Jackie and Rene McLean, Nat remembering Cannonball, the

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Pizzarellis discussing the family pizza business (no, no - sorry!), but also Duffy Jackson, son of Chubby, the bassist with that great Herman herd (the under-appreciated Pete Candoli gets a mention here!).

Before we leave the families, I should say that this category in the end justified itself most compellingly. Louis Bellson talking about his mother and uncles and all their musical connections is wonderful stuff, more interesting than you can probably imagine.



*Chris Potter: talent-spotted at 14 years of age by Jimmy Heath...PHOTO CREDIT JOHN ABBOTT*

Current stars are here - Cyrus Chestnut, Diana Krall, James Morrison, Marcus Roberts, etc - but so is Slam Stewart, bless his heart. Stokes concentrates on first inspirations, first musical partnerships and, more broadly, the always fascinating subject of childhood and youth in general. This leaves plenty of room, however, for musical insights, likes and dislikes; but some of these are so interesting you would like to see them taken a bit further.

For instance, pianist John Eaton talking about Fats Wailer, James P Johnson (damn, another three-barreller) and Willie The Lion Smith (phew, how many names is that?). This is really interesting - but a little more please. The brief interview with Gerry Mulligan, not long before his death, is really a snapshot, but many allusions are caught within it. I would have

liked to hear what Slam Stewart thought of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, who gave two of their most memorable performances with Slam, Red Norvo, Teddy Wilson etc on *Slam Slam Blues* - one of Dizzy's great overlooked introspective solos with cup mute - and *Hallelujah*. Never mind, it's wonderful to read Slam talking about Slim Gaillard and the origins of the immortal *Flat Foot Floogie*. And of course the evolution of his unique double bass and voice octave unisons.

Some of the interviews go back a way. Or should that be ways? Jimmie Heath talent spots the 14-year-old saxophonist Chris Potter! There is little contentiousness, but Paul Bley argues against having stylistic models on your own instrument. He asks rhetorically whether we need any more Coltrane saxophonists, and claims that Louis Armstrong ruined a generation of trumpet players (I could name a few who got through the net with sounds and styles of their own).

After all these years I'm still not nuts about James Morrison's playing, but I am one of a tiny minority. With brilliant PR instincts, Morrison cloned me into an army - the critics hate me but the people love me! Stokes has completely circumvented what was the standard Morrison interview at the time this one was done, and allowed James to give us an account of his arrival in New York with his brother in an exotic species of motor launch - all of which even fascinated me!

Morrison is in a section on jazz artists from non-American climes, which also includes Ingrid Jensen (a very nice trumpet player and composer from Canada), Monty Alexander (an interesting piece this, with a cameo appearance by Frank Sinatra). Sumi Toonooka is of course American, but her mother was interned during World War II.

Look, he may have an impressive moniker, but Stokes is one of the blokes. And he enjoys a relaxed standing with female musicians too. There he is, photographed with Dee Dee Bridgewater (very interesting interview), young violinist Regina Carter, and so on. Everyone looks very much at ease with him. I suspect that this is because he is a nice fellow. He has given us a very nice book. Just the thing to read if you are flying off somewhere to hear some music.

### **Postscript:**

*[Editor's note: W Royal Stokes, on receipt of the Oct/Nov 01 edition of JazzChord wrote the following letter to the editor, which was published in the Dec 01/Jan 02 edition of JazzChord.]*

Sir,

I have to say that J Lester Clare's assessment of my book *Living the Jazz Life* is, bar none, the best written, most perceptive, and wittiest piece yet done on the book. Clearly, it was penned by someone who had actually read the book in its entirety and then thought deeply about what he had read and what he had experienced in the course of that reading. I shall write him thanks and explain the source of the mysterious "W". And enquire what the "J" (minus a period after it) represents.

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