

HENRY (RED) ALLEN: THE NEW YORK JAZZ SCENE AND A TOUR OF HARLEM

by Clement Semmler*

Clement Semmler's book "Pictures on the Margin: Memoirs" was published in 1991. The last two chapters are entitled "Jazz Memories". Chapter 17 is entitled "Oh Play That Thing: Jazz at Home and Abroad". The following is a reproduction of Chapter 18, entitled "Henry (Red) Allen: The New York Jazz Scene and a Tour of Harlem".

This chapter is based to some extent on a coincidence. I had collected jazz recordings since 1934: in those days of course they were called 78s — recordings rotating at seventy-eight revolutions per minute, with individual tracks that ran for three minutes or so. Their musical quality was nothing like that achieved in these later days of long play (LP) discs and compact discs (CDs), but they were the staple diet of jazz lovers down the years and we all treasured our Duke Ellingtons, Louis Armstrongs, Bix Beiderbeckes and the like.



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One of my especial favourites was an HMV 78 by a trumpet player called Henry (Red) Allen with a small group of a tune called *It Should Be You*. I bought it in Adelaide in the late 1930s. It had been recorded in 1929 when Allen was playing with the Negro orchestra of Luis Russell at the Saratoga Club in Harlem. Russell's was one of the first and best of the big Negro bands that were beginning to build the dynasty of swing music that took the world by storm in the 1930s and 1940s.

This particular recording featured players from the Russell band: the great Negro trombonist, J C Higginbotham, Luis Russell himself on piano, the bassist George (Pops) Foster and others. But the trumpet playing of Red Allen was like nothing I had heard before, not even by Louis Armstrong on the few recordings of his playing that I had. It was powerful, aggressive, gripping and yet with a lyrical intensity of feeling that moved me almost to tears. From then on I was a Red Allen fan.



*L-R, J C Higginbotham, Henry 'Red' Allen, Luis Russell & Paul Barbarin, pictured in Chicago in 1942...
PHOTO COURTESY FRANK DRIGGS COLLECTION*

During the 1940s I managed to track down a number of recordings he had made, with his own small groups, with Russell's orchestra and also with those of Fletcher Henderson, Lucky Millinder and others. In what jazz literature was available (not much in those days, and there were no sleeve notes on 78s as there are now on LPs) I found out that Allen had been born in New Orleans in 1908; that he had joined the band of the legendary New Orleans trumpet player, Joe (King) Oliver, in 1927; and that he had come to New York in 1929 to join Russell's band, thereafter playing with Fletcher Henderson, Lucky Millinder and others, and leading his own small groups in various New York and Chicago nightclubs.

On my first visit to New York in January 1956 I spent several happy nights at Eddie Condon's Club down in Greenwich Village. I was staying at the Lexington hotel on Lexington Avenue, and some days later I asked the desk clerk where I could hear some good jazz nearer home since it was quite a hike down to the Village. He wasn't a

jazz fan, he confessed, but he guessed he knew where it was all at. There was Jimmy Ryan's up on West 52nd Street, and the Hickory House. Then there was Nick's down on West 10th and 7th Avenue: he knew a lot of jazz guys went there, but it was a fair step from the Lexington. Then there was the Embers up on 59th, but that was a fairly classy joint. He figured that the most noise came from a spot called the Metropole up on West 48th and 7th Avenue. "You can't miss it, pal. You'll hear the music from two blocks away."



The Metropole, on West 48th and 7th Avenue, New York, on this occasion featuring the drummer Gene Krupa: "You can't miss it, pal. You'll hear the music from two blocks away"...

I found my way up there, and he was quite right. A piercing trumpet assailed me as I walked along 48th: something about it was familiar, surely. And then suddenly, there was the Metropole, and in neon lights: "Red Allen. Nightly. 10 pm to 3 am." Red Allen! I couldn't believe my luck. I hastened in. Compared with Eddie Condon's the decor was spartan: a long bar, with patrons three or four deep; behind it a long narrow platform on which the musicians held court: opposite it a space with tables and chairs of purely functional design for those who wanted to drink and listen in more comfort: huge blow-ups of Allen and his fellow musicians around the walls. Waiters bustled about with trays and jugs of beer: there was a steady stomping of feet and clapping of hands and shouts of "Yeah, man!", "Oh, you dog!", "Hit it again,

Red!" and so on. Over the haze of smoke the music soared from crescendo to crescendo, enveloping all in sheets of rhythmic sound.

Red Allen! With him were Negro jazzmen whose music I had likewise cherished over the years: Buster Bailey, a clarinetist of dazzling technique, whose playing I knew from my Fletcher Henderson recordings; the pianist Claude Hopkins who back in the 1930s had led one of the best Negro bands at the Savoy and Roseland ballrooms in Harlem and who played piano with the fleetness of Fats Waller and the elegance of Count Basie; and Cozy Cole, one of the greatest drummers in jazz.



Buster Bailey (left), a clarinetist of dazzling technique, was in Allen's band, along with pianist Claude Hopkins (below) who back in the 1930s had led one of the best Negro bands at the Savoy and Roseland ballrooms in Harlem...





Red Allen's band also included Cozy Cole, one of the greatest drummers in jazz...

There was another clarinetist, new to me, named Sol Yaged, who played very much like Benny Goodman, and who, as a matter of fact, later on was to coach Steve Allen in his clarinet playing when he took the role of Benny Goodman in the film, *The Benny Goodman Story*.



There was another clarinetist, new to Semmler, named Sol Yaged (above), who played very much like Benny Goodman...

The trombonist was Herb Flemming who, Red Allen later told me, had played with Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong and whose real name was Niccolaiih El-Michelle: he was of North African descent.



The trombonist was Herb Flemming (above) whose real name was Niccolaiih El-Michelle: he was of North African descent...

Red dominated the small stage: a large man, medium dark-skinned; running to weight; slightly balding; a high forehead with dark hair; a single, curving deeply-creased line over his eyebrows; heavily-lidded, narrowly-set, quizzical eyes; deeply furrowed cheeks and a wonderful smile that lit up his whole face. When he blew his trumpet his face assumed a curiously ovoid shape. The band was playing *Sweet Georgia Brown* as I squeezed in at the bar, almost opposite Red and ordered a beer from the ever-vigilant bartender; as in most of those bars you kept your place as long as you drank. Red, trumpet at the ready, was tapping his foot as Claude Hopkins finished off a piano break and then he took off with several magnificent choruses.

During the evening I passed him up my card, on the back of which I had scrawled: "One of your Australian fans. Will you play *It Should Be You*?" He squinted at it, smiled broadly, showed it to Buster Bailey, and at the next intermission stepped down to the bar and shook my hand. He was amazed that I should have heard of that recording. "It goes back some," he said, "but I'll see if the boys can play it later on." And that they did; after some whispered consultation and sounding of chords, *It Should Be You* rent the air, with Red's trumpet in glorious flight — glissandos, rips, spattered notes and growls — and how he could hit those high notes! Not even Armstrong could have bettered him that night. I went to the Metropole night after night for the next week or so — struggling home "beat to the socks" (as Red put it) in the early hours. From my diary, 31 January 1956:

In evening walked up again to 48th. Raining. Red in terrific form. Gave me big hello. Spoke to Buster Bailey too – very friendly bloke. Band played "King Porter Stomp" at my request; the joint really jumped. An Irishman next to me told me he loved jazz. He was a merchant sailor on the Atlantic run; never missed a night when he was in port. "Jesus, man, where would you ever hear jazz like this?" I agreed and we sank a few beers together. Band played "High Society" and clowned around with "Baby Won't You Please Come Home" with their own lewd lyrics that the crowd loved. Red has a great singing voice, especially with the blues: his "St Louis Blues" had the crowd stamping and cheering.



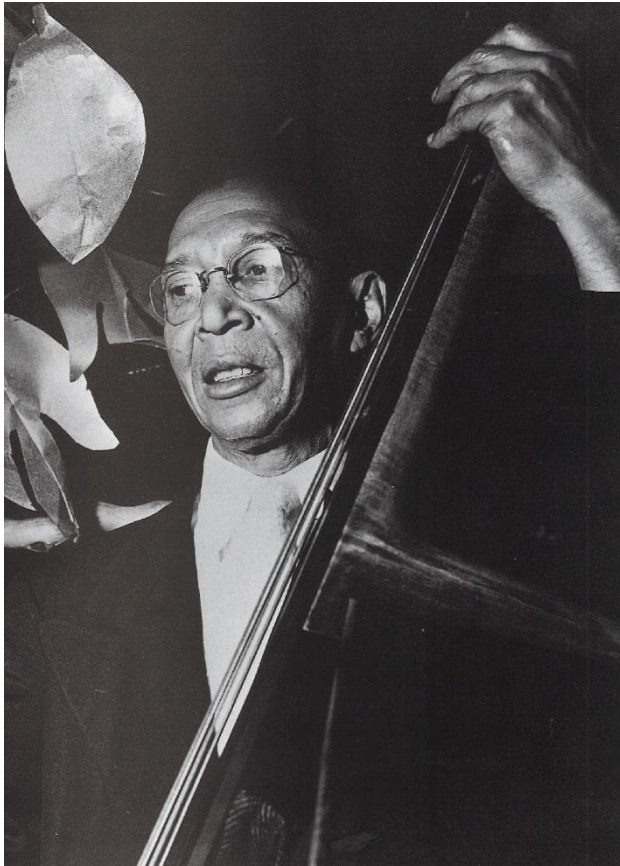
When Red blew his trumpet his face assumed a curiously ovoid shape...PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

Some nights when Red sighted me coming in he would give a great blast on his trumpet and shout, "Here's the boy from down under!"

I think it was on the fifth or sixth night that I asked Red if he would come to the BBC studios (in those days the ABC shared an office with the BBC in the Rockefeller Centre and the BBC did any recording work for us) and record an interview for me to send back for Eric Child's Saturday morning program. It was a pretty cheeky request, since the daytime must have been precious to him for catching up on his sleep, but he readily agreed. We fixed it for 11 o'clock the next morning: what was more, he said he would run me up to Harlem after the recording to look at some of the jazz places, and then take me back to his apartment in the Bronx to meet his wife Pearlie May and have "a bite and a drink".

I'll never forget the surprise on the faces of the rather pukka BBC sound engineers when I marched in with a large Negro dressed in a checked orange and blue jacket,

white trousers and shoes, white tie and navy shirt. Yes, Red told me in the interview, he had been born in New Orleans and his father Henry Allen Senior had led one of the greatest brass bands in New Orleans from 1907 to 1940 (he died in 1952 at the age of 75). He was a trumpet player too and in between running his band he worked as a longshoreman; one of his fellow workers was George (Pops) Foster, the great bass player of so many later jazz sessions.



George (Pops) Foster, the great bass player of so many later jazz sessions, worked as a longshoreman with Red's father Henry Allen Senior... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NEW AGE JAZZ

Red's brother, Sam, played the tuba in the band and another brother, George, the drums. Red was proud of the fact that some of the most famous New Orleans jazz musicians had, at one time or another, played in his father's band, including Punch Miller, Joe (King) Oliver, Papa Celestin and Louis Armstrong.

Louis, said Red, was a phenomenal cornet player, even in his teens; he was ten years older than Red but in those days Red had tried to model his style on Louis. Red played in his father's band in the early 1920s. The band performed at parades at weekends and on holidays and festival days; at social club picnics and especially at funerals, which were really great occasions. The band would gather at the dead man's house and then march behind the cortege to the church, playing slowly — sad, slow tunes. While the church service was on the musicians would retire to a nearby saloon and refresh themselves; as a small boy, Red recalled, his job was to round up the men when the service was over to begin the march to the cemetery. There they would wait on the outskirts till they heard the crying and moaning which signalled the ritual of

dirt being thrown on the coffin while the preacher intoned "ashes to ashes". Then the band would let its hair down on the way back to the dead person's home for the party to follow. It was fast, happy music — one of the favourite tunes was *Oh, Didn't He Ramble*.

There were many such brass bands in New Orleans; they all played at the Mardi Gras festival. Red started playing the violin, then he switched to the peck horn when he began playing in his father's band. But he soon found his father's trumpet more to his liking and he started taking lessons. "That's how I got the nickname 'Red'. You see I was fairly light-skinned as a youth and my face got very flushed when I blew hard." In his teens he got jobs playing in cabarets and other brass bands. He played in knickerbockers "because boys weren't allowed to wear long pants until they were seventeen or eighteen".

He went up to New York in 1927 for a brief period to join a band led by the famous trumpet player Joe (King) Oliver whom he had known in his father's band. It was the first time Red had played at Harlem's Savoy ballroom. "Even though he was only 40 or so," said Red, "Joe suffered badly from pyorrhoeia and most of his teeth were gone so I took most of the solos. Not bad for a kid of 19!"



Red went up to New York in 1927 for a brief period to join a band led by the famous trumpet player Joe (King) Oliver (left)... It was the first time Red played at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NEW AGE JAZZ

Then he went back to New Orleans and played on a riverboat that plied the Mississippi with a band led by Fate Marable. He was an astonishing character according to Red, a very light-skinned Negro with red hair who played the piano and the calliope. He was a strict disciplinarian and insisted on regular rehearsals; moreover every one of his players had to be able to read music and be prepared to tackle anything from classical music to waltzes and popular tunes to please "whiteys" who mainly rode the paddle-wheeled steamers. Of course jazz was the main attraction and when they stopped at towns on the run people stood 20 or 30 deep to hear them play.



Fate Marable's New Orleans Band on the SS Sidney, circa 1919. L-R, Baby Dodds (drums), Bebe Idgley (trombone), Joe Howard (trumpet), Louis Armstrong (trumpet), Fate Marable (piano), Dave Jones (mellophone), Johnny Dodds (clarinet), Johnny St Cyr (banjo), Pops Foster (bass)... PHOTO COURTESY TULANE.EDU

Red described the Fate Marable band as a "floating conservatorium" of music because some of the greatest names in jazz had played with it in their earlier careers — men like Louis Armstrong, Pops Foster, Zutty Singleton the drummer, Jimmy Blanton who later played bass with Duke Ellington, Johnny Dodds the legendary New Orleans clarinetist and his brother Warren (Baby) Dodds, a drummer.

In 1929 he got two calls to New York — one to the band of Luis Russell (who had played the piano in King Oliver's band) and the other to that of Duke Ellington. He opted for Russell's since his father's friend, Pops Foster, was in the band and so was another fellow New Orleansian, Paul Barbarin who played drums. Red thought it was Cootie Williams who took the trumpet chair with Ellington instead — thus beginning a famous association in jazz history. The Luis Russell band, in Red's opinion was the "most swinging" band in New York at the time. "At the Roseland ballroom where we played in Harlem the dancers packed the place and loved us. It was the happiest band I ever worked with."



Three stars of the early riverboat jazz, L-R, trumpeters Henry 'Red' Allen & Louis Armstrong, and drummer Zutty Singleton... PHOTO COURTESY HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION



A rare photo of the Luis Russell Orchestra at the Saratoga Club, New York City, 1930. Louis Armstrong is in the front row third from right. Second from right is Luis Russell...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

After hours he used to go to the Rhythm Club on 132nd Street where he sat in on jam sessions: many of the leading trumpet players of the day joined in, like Rex Stewart, Ward Pinkett, Sidney de Paris, Cootie Williams and others. It helped to "hone his style", as he put it. In the 1930s depression years things were bad, but eventually he joined up with Louis Armstrong in 1937; later on he led his own band in Chicago at the Downbeat Club with Billie Holiday, one of the greatest of jazz singers. Billie Holiday was having one of her bad times then, Red recalled, with drink and drugs. Sometimes she wouldn't turn up at all, and they would use another girl singer named Ruth Jones who was always hanging around for a chance to sing. They renamed her

Dynamite Washington, which later became Dinah Washington — she was one of the best blues and folk singers of later years.



Henry 'Red' Allen and trombonist J C Higginbotham are seen here backing Billie Holiday in 1939... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



When Billie Holiday failed to turn up, they would use another girl singer named Ruth Jones who was always hanging around for a chance to sing. They renamed her Dynamite Washington, which later became Dinah Washington (left)...

After we had finished the recording we went down to where Red's car was parked — a rather battered red Lincoln. "We'll drive up to Harlem, have a bite of lunch, and I'll show you some of the spots," he said. "Most of them don't open till night, but we might catch a few of the guys rehearsing." (With his pronounced Bronx accent it came out as "rehoising".) Harlem in 1956, though it had no fixed boundaries, was the top part of Manhattan Island wedged in by the Harlem River on the eastern side, a neighbourhood bounded by 155th Street to the north, 110th Street to the south and Amsterdam Avenue to the west. In the years since, of course, the district has gradually moved further south, and as a result of greatly increased crime and violence in the 1960s, private community organisations and city administration combined to provide better hospitals, schools, medical facilities and, especially, youth centres to reduce juvenile delinquency.

Red was a mine of information about Harlem. After all, it had been his musical stamping ground for nearly 20 years, and he loved the place. He told me how, at the beginning of the century, Harlem was quite a respectable white middle-class district. There followed a building boom as developers tried to make it an even more fashionable residential retreat for wealthy New Yorkers. The boom, as Red put it, later turned into a bust. The many brownstone buildings remained empty until an enterprising Negro real estate salesman named Philip Payton persuaded some of the landlords who owned houses in Lenox Avenue, the centre of Harlem, to rent to Negro families.



An enterprising Negro real estate salesman named Philip Payton (left) persuaded some of the landlords who owned houses in the centre of Harlem, to rent to Negro families...

At the time there was a large Negro population in the south end of Manhattan in the Greenwich Village and 2nd Avenue areas, gradually being squeezed out by Italian and Irish migrants. So they flocked north to the "promised land" as it was called, and by 1930 there were nearly a million people in an area originally planned to accommodate less than a hundred thousand. Red told me that living conditions were pretty terrible when he first "hit" the place in the late 1920s. With the great influx of Negroes then, absentee landlords converted the old brownstone houses into apartments, partitioning big rooms into what were not much better than cells large enough to hold a bed, a dresser and a broken chair or two. They even developed the "hot bed" idea where one tenant slept days while the alternate tenant worked, and vice versa at night.



Absentee landlords converted the old brownstone houses into apartments, partitioning big rooms into what were not much better than cells large enough to hold a bed, a dresser and a broken chair or two...

It was this huge influx, according to Red, that made Harlem a great jazz centre. Music was about the only source of entertainment, and, of course, the churches nurtured dozens of exotic religious sects, all with a common interest in gospel singing. More and more jazzmen poured in from the Deep South where the word had gone that there was a Negro democracy free of white oppression. These were the days especially of the jazz pianists who played in the saloons and honky-tonks — early giants like Jelly Roll Morton and Eubie Blake. Red recalled local identities like Willie (Egghead) Jewell, Willie (One Leg) Joseph and John (Jack the Bear) Wilson.

Later came more famous pianists like Jimmy Johnson who taught Fats Waller, Willie (The Lion) Smith and then Fats Waller himself, all of whom made popular the type of piano playing called Harlem Stride where left-hand bass chords set up a compelling beat against treble improvisation. These pianists were in great demand for "rent parties" which developed from the old-fashioned parlour suppers and church socials. As, thanks to grasping landlords, rents skyrocketed, it became a constant fight for tenants to raise the monthly payments. So the rent party came into being. The word would go out that it was on at such and such an apartment. There was an admission charge, and a bottle of liquor (bootlegged in early years) was mandatory, but lashings of food were provided by the tenant — pigs' feet, gumbo, baked ham and fried

chicken. Red said he had been to a few — they were wild affairs that went on all night and often well into the next day. But there weren't calls for trumpet players. Pianists were most popular with sometimes a drummer. The pianists were paid ten dollars an hour and often they would move from party to party. Fats Waller and Willie (The Lion) Smith were among Harlem's best-known rent party pianists. The partygoers danced "The Bump", "The Grind" and "The Monkey Hunch". Sometimes the pianists would put tin pieces over the hammers of the instrument to make it sound like an old-fashioned pianola and the drummer would muffle his traps with a blanket. Then they'd play the blues.



Willie (The Lion) Smith (left) and Fats Waller (right) were among Harlem's best-known rent party pianists...

Red said that rent parties were big until the local gangs took over. They demanded that the partygiver hire one of their men as a doorkeeper to check for razors and guns. For this, the members of the Harlem Rats, the Jolly Fellows, the Pink Roses or whatever, got a prohibitive percentage of the takings. It was purely a protection racket. This, and the coming of the jukeboxes, according to Red, spelled the end of the rent parties in the middle 1930s. The pianists, their reputations established, began to find alternative work in saloons and night clubs and built small bands round them — and so began the great jazz age of Harlem. The big orchestras came into their own in the large places of entertainment that a huge population demanded — the Savoy Ballroom on Lenox Avenue, the Rose Danceland on West 125th Street

(more familiarly known as the Roseland where Red had played with Luis Russell), the Golden Gate ballroom, also on Lenox, the Apollo Theatre on West 125th.



The Savoy Ballroom in 1941 (left).. Below is Roseland at that time featuring nightly the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra...



The Cotton Club on Lenox didn't fall into this category, said Red. It used Negro bands like Duke Ellington's, Cab Calloway's, Jimmy Lunceford's and others and top singers like Ethel Waters and Adelaide Hall, dancers like Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, but it was all strictly for the wealthy white folk and socialites from downtown who went slumming in Harlem for their entertainment. Black people weren't welcome in the audience. So Red rambled on to his eager listener as we sped through the traffic, past Central Park and into Harlem. I remember asking him about some jazz musicians who were among my favourites. The tenor saxophonist, Lester Young, for instance. Red was glad I'd asked about Lester —he was one of the greatest, and had influenced more saxophonists even than the mighty Coleman Hawkins. No wonder Billie Holiday had christened him "Pres" — for President — the top man.



Lester Young: when he was drafted into the Army he was sent down to a camp in Georgia, in the middle of Klu Klux Klan territory. "They beat the shit out of him," said Red bitterly... PHOTO COURTESY A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF JAZZ

"He was drafted into the Army and they beat the shit out of him," said Red bitterly. "They sent him down to a camp in Georgia — in the middle of Klu Klux Klan territory. You can imagine what they did to him. He told me once it was a nightmare he'd never forget." Yet, Red went on, it was marvellous how Lester still played. Red had heard him at the Blue Note only a few months back and he sounded great; he lived at Long Island and only came up for a few gigs. He told Red he planned to go over to Paris with a small band. Red felt that the trouble with Lester was that, as his

ability diminished, he suffered from a sort of musical claustrophobia in hearing himself over and over again in every up and coming saxophonist — many of them sounding more like him than he did himself. (Lester Young died in March 1959 of a heart attack soon after he returned from Paris. His lifelong friend and admirer, Billie Holiday, died a few months later.)

Charlie Parker worshipped Lester Young, continued Red. When Parker first went on the road he took along all Lester's recordings he could get hold of and committed them to memory. Red maintained that no other saxophonist, not even Young, or Hawkins, or Ben Webster achieved such a sound as Parker at his best; it could be edgy and sharp, smooth and big, soft and lush — just what he wanted it to be. Yet he used almost no vibrato. He was probably the best blues improviser jazz had ever produced. In the end drugs and booze had killed him only the year before (1955) — at the ripe old age of 35, said Red ironically.



Charlie Parker: when he first went on the road he took along all Lester Young's recordings he could get hold of and committed them to memory... PHOTO COURTESY GARY GIDDINS CELEBRATING BIRD

As we drove into the Harlem district I must say I experienced a let-down. Perhaps I had built up a vision of my own promised land — of pulsating life and exotic scenes. In fact it was rather seedy and conventional — in the daytime at any rate. Perhaps with neon lights and bustling activity it would have been more interesting at night. There were black men and women everywhere, of course, shopping, walking, talking in groups; children scampering about; almost, apart from black for white, an ordinary city-suburban scene in a less favoured neighbourhood. There were streets of brownstone tenement buildings, almost black with age, hopelessly dilapidated as were wooden buildings, with paint peeling and broken window boxes. As slum dwellings they were no better or worse than those I had seen in back streets of Leeds or in the East End of London.

Shopping centres presented a more prosperous sight. We stopped off first of all at what Red said was one of his favourite Harlem eateries — the Hot-cha Bar and Grill on 7th Avenue, where a counter clerk greeted Red effusively. How was the jazz, man? Fine, just fine. We had ham on rye with side salads of pickles and peppers, and Schlitz beer. The joint was opened about the first time he came to Harlem, said Red — and this was where Billie Holiday first sang and where a talent scout from the Apollo Theatre first heard her. It was a great place for after-hours jam sessions in the old days — with jazzmen like Chu Berry, Roy Eldridge, the pianist Garland Wilson and others. It was more formal now — usually only a house pianist, and I noticed from a sign on the wall that Don Frye was the pianist presently playing there.



Semmler noticed that Don Frye was the pianist at that time playing at the Hot-cha Bar and Grill on 7th Avenue...

At this distance of time I have only fragments of memory and scribbled diary notes of the places we visited during that afternoon. I do quite vividly remember Lenox Avenue — a wide, clean thoroughfare with plenty of activity on the sidewalks, and with pleasant, modern shops and bars. Red showed me where the Cotton Club had stood; it was now a fairly neat apartment block. The opening nights here in the old days were as big as Broadway's, said Red, and because of its fashionable white clientele it was the first jazz spot in Harlem from which radio broadcasts were made by a New York station: Duke Ellington's band had made its first broadcast there. Lena Horne first sang there as a teenager too; when her father tried to take her away the gangster bosses of the place beat him up.



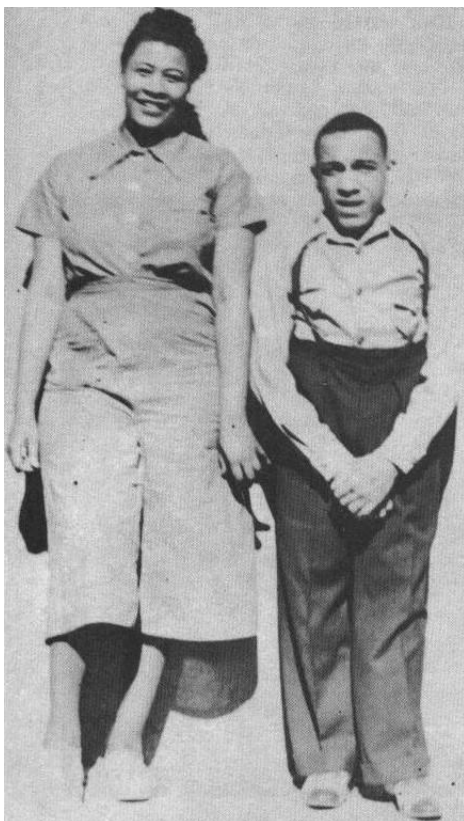
Lena Horne: she first sang at the Cotton Club as a teenager...

But my most memorable experience on Lenox Avenue was to enter the Savoy ballroom — famous to me from my treasured 78s of bands like Chick Webb's, Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy, Al Cooper's Savoy Sultans and other early bands that had played there. Later the big white swing bands of Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Tommy Dorsey and others came on the scene too. Red had played there, as I have already mentioned, with King Oliver and later with Luis Russell, Fletcher Henderson, and Louis Armstrong. They had the so-called Battles of the Bands there in the late 1930s and early 1940s: Red recalled the night when they pitted Benny Goodman's band against the reigning house band of Chick Webb, and Webb won hands down.



The Savoy, here advertising the Jimmy Lunceford and Chick Webb bands... PHOTO COURTESY THE BIG BAND YEARS

Webb was a little hunchbacked drummer, often in pain from a spinal deformity — yet Red considered he was perhaps the most dynamic drummer he had ever heard. He galvanised the band and his audiences as he sat, high up on his traps, and beat out his rhythms. It was Webb who had taken a shy, gangling teenaged Harlem girl, Ella Fitzgerald, under his wing and coached her to become one of the best singers in jazz.



Ella Fitzgerald & Chick Webb, circa 1938: he coached her to become one of the best singers in jazz... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

They called the Savoy "The Home of Happy Feet", but in his time there, Red said, it was known simply as "The Track". Every kid in Harlem came there to dance — with its sprung floor and ten-cent partners it was the focal point of all Harlem entertainment — exciting, tumultuous, beautiful. The dancers spurred on the bands.

All the early dance styles originated there — the "Flying Charleston", the "Stomp", the "Big Apple", the "Jitterbug", the "Snake-hips", the "Shimmy". Perhaps the most famous was the "Lindy Hop" which, Red told me, had been invented and named by the dancers in 1927 to commemorate Lindbergh's Atlantic flight. Some of the dancers wore out a pair of shoes each night. But the Savoy was more than just an evening ballroom for the Harlemites: it hosted breakfast dances, radio shows, prize drawings, and held amateur nights and dancing championships. I noticed from the hoardings that the resident band for the week was led by Cootie Williams. (The Savoy was torn down in 1958 to make way for a housing project.)



*The Lindy Hop:
invented and
named by the
dancers in 1927 to
commemorate
Lindbergh's
Atlantic flight...*

Along West 125th Street we saw the office building on the site of what had been the Roseland ballroom where some of the best jazz in the 1930s was played: many white bands later came up especially to perform there, like those led by Jack Teagarden, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Gene Krupa, and others. But the chief attraction on West 125th, and the place I remember most vividly, was the Apollo Theatre, situated between 7th and 8th Avenues, which I knew was one of Harlem's most famous venues for jazz and for Negro entertainers, singers and dancers. From outside it was

an unimpressive building — a dark grey, three-storied brick pile, the upper stories each fronted by four large plate-glass windows, giving the building a most un-theatre-like look. Projecting well over the sidewalk, along the left half of the theatre's facade, was an awning with "Apollo" in huge letters and above it an equally large vertical display, flashing purple letters spelling out the name against a white background. The attraction for the week was Thurman Ruth's Gospel Caravan: according to Red there was little jazz heard there now; it was mainly rhythm and blues and gospel singing which was, in popular entertainment, the hottest black musical form.



The Apollo on 125th Street where, in 1935, Blanche Calloway's band played...PHOTO COURTESY THE BOG BAND YEARS

Just before the theatre entrance, Red stopped to show me a series of large photo-montage panels with the names of hundreds of celebrities who had played the Apollo: Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters, Sarah Vaughan, Count Basie, Billie Holiday — and, sure enough, smiling largely Red pointed to a photograph of himself. There was also a brilliant action picture of the famous black dancer, Bill (Bojangles) Robinson.



The famous black dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson: a brilliant action picture of him... PHOTO COURTESY THE BILLY ROSE THEATRE COLLECTION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

We entered the theatre. Confronting us was a huge stage surrounded by eight Doric columns, and on the sides of the theatre two balconies — the second seeming to me inordinately steep. This housed the cheaper seats, populated by kids and poor blacks who could only just afford them. It was called the "leaping balcony". Red said that some of these patrons became so "high" from the music that they actually jumped down. Red told the story that when Count Basie was playing his *One O'Clock Jump* one night, one of the fans duly jumped at the appointed hour. He wasn't sure if that was true or not. But it was true — because Lionel Hampton had told him — that one night when Hamp's band was playing its most famous tune, *Flying Home*, "Some cat stood on the rail, shouted 'I'm flyin' man!', and jumped down into the orchestra pit". Luckily nobody was badly hurt.

Especially in the 1930s and 1940s, attending the Apollo was a ritual for young Harlemites. They had to go along every Friday or Saturday night to catch the new show. There would be queues stretching around the block for popular bands like those of Ellington, Basie and Hampton. According to Red, it was the Apollo that with the Savoy ballroom sparked the great swing era of the 1930s. Harlem dwellers became passionate swing fans — they danced to the big bands at the Savoy and came to listen at the Apollo — from, say, Chick Webb or Don Redman or Basie on the one hand, to Hampton, Erskine Hawkins, Ellington and so on, on the other. It was a period of incredible musical excitement. In Red's view the Apollo, as a black theatre, was Harlem's most cultural institution, a special place to come of age eventually — professionally, socially, politically. It was the apex of black entertainment.

During the afternoon Red and I visited at least a dozen famous jazz centres. I remember the Bamboo Inn on 7th Avenue and also on that avenue the site of Connie's Inn, now the Admiral Cafe. Red remembered Connie's Inn with great affection — he had played there with Luis Russell and Fletcher Henderson and it was one of the top jazz spots in the 1930s. It had been named after its owner, Connie Immerman, who with his brother George, ran a Harlem delicatessen in the 1920s. Fats Waller had been one of their delivery boys and it was a strange twist, said Red, that ten years or so later Fats Waller had written and played in one of Connie's Inn's most successful floor shows, *Hot Chocolates*, from which came one of Waller's best loved tunes, *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

Our last stop was at Count Basie's Lounge, also on 7th Avenue, where we had a drink before we headed south for the Bronx and Red's home. Red knew the barman at Basie's Lounge — he was one of Basie's cousins, a genial, affable black giant named Homer who poured us a beer and introduced me to the house pianist who was rehearsing for the evening. This was the first I had heard of "Sir" Charles Thompson: he and Red knew each other well and exchanged the usual jazzmen's greetings, though Red told me later they had never played together.



"Sir" Charles Thompson, circa 1962: he sounded very much like Basie with that curious economy of notes that characterised the latter's playing... PHOTO COURTESY ALAMY

The "Sir" bit was purely honorary: Thompson's agent had decided that since there was already a duke and a count in the world of jazz, his client deserved the accolade too. He played a couple of numbers for us — a lovely pianist, he sounded very much

like Basie with that curious economy of notes that characterised the latter's playing. As we chatted he told me he had worked with Lester Young and Charlie Parker, both "the greatest, man", and I've since collected some of his recordings. One of the tunes he played for us was his own composition *Robbin's Nest* — since become a very popular medium for jazz improvising. It was a fitting end to my tour of Harlem.

As we drove back to the Bronx I remember we talked about drugs: I mentioned that it was a popular belief that many jazz musicians were often high on marijuana. Many of them were, Red said. Playing most of the night with all stops out was beyond ordinary endurance: alcohol dulled the senses whereas "the weed" put them on a high. He didn't condone it, but he could understand it. The worst thing was when they went on to the hard stuff; that was usually the end of them, as with Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and one or two others. He'd tried hash once or twice, but had never found it necessary even though his playing regimen at the Metropole, for instance, meant he had to be at his top for six or seven hours during the night. He mentioned some of the euphemisms for marijuana that had passed into the argot of jazz: "the weed", "gace", "pot", "tea", "stash", "reefer" and so on. A "viper" was a "tea" smoker — hence the title of one of Fats Waller's most popular piano pieces *Viper's Drag*.



*A rare shot of Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker together: the worst thing was when they went on to the hard stuff; that was usually the end of them...
PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

We talked on about how many jazz expressions had passed into everyday usage, some of them even becoming clichés: words like "cop-out", "hang-up", "corny", "the scene", "-ville" as in "hicksville", "uptight", "square", "way out", "freebee" and so on. But some of the most popular jazz expressions, according to Red, were never picked up by the "straight" men: "hides" (drums), "spots" (music notes), "a solid sender" (a

good performer), "rug-cutter" (a dancer), "to lay some iron" (tap dance) and so on. All this added to my admiration for Red — here was a jazz musician, a thinking man and most literate. Through a bewildering maze of traffic and freeways we eventually reached the Bronx and Red turned the Ford into Prospect Avenue — quite a wide street of old wooden houses, many of them neatly painted white, and a number of brick and brownstone apartment buildings. Red parked outside a five-storey, yellow brick block. "This is it," he said. "We're at the top." We climbed five flights of stairs and Red pressed the doorbell. "It's me, Pearlie May!" he shouted and the door was opened by a plumpish, pleasant-faced woman in a pink house dress. "This is Clem, my friend from down-under I told you about," said Red. "Why, you're most welcome," she replied with just a touch of a Southern accent.

As we chatted, Pearlie May brought in a tray with teapot, cups and a plate of sandwiches. "Let's have a drink first," said Red, pulling out a bottle of Scotch and calling out to Pearlie May in the kitchen for some ice and glasses. Red poured a couple of drinks and settled back. When he asked me about Sydney I told him the jazz scene was on the up and up — going into the pubs, and so on. He said he hoped he might get out there one day, but first he wanted to go to Europe. After all, he was 48, and many of his fellow musicians had already been there on concert tours. It was just a matter of the right band and the right offer. I mentioned the enormous reputation Sidney Bechet had established over there.



Sidney Bechet: Red had played with him in the early 1920s in the parade bands, when Sidney played a cornet... PHOTO COURTESY ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ

This led Red to reminisce about his early association with Bechet. He was, of course, a New Orleans man and Red had played with him in the early 1920s in the parade bands. Sidney played a cornet then. "He was about ten years older than me, but he blew a mighty cornet. I remember once when I was a kid in short pants and started playing in my dad's band, one Sidney wanted to join in, but he didn't have his cornet with him, so my father told me to run over to Jake Fink's pawnshop to borrow a cornet for Sidney. He played a marvellous horn and I often used to follow him in parades listening to him. But later he switched to the clarinet."

Red told me he didn't really catch up with Sidney again till the early 1940s when he played with him in some small pick-up groups in New York. In 1941, with the trombonist Jay Higginbotham and drummer J C Heard and one or two others, he took part in one of Bechet's most famous recording dates for the RCA-Victor company. He recalled that one of the tunes was *Baby, Won't You Please Come Home*, and he really blew well, and Bechet hugged him enthusiastically afterwards. Sometimes he'd meet Bechet at Jimmy Ryan's spot on West 54th Street; after hours they'd sit in in jam sessions with Tony Scott, the clarinetist and one or two others and they'd play into the small hours. Tallulah Bankhead was Bechet's steady girlfriend at the time and she'd often come in, drop her mink coat on a chair, cross her legs and watch Sidney with loving eyes. When the session was finished they'd go off into the night together.



*Tallulah Bankhead (left) was Bechet's steady girlfriend at the time; she'd often come in, drop her mink coat on a chair, cross her legs and watch Sidney with loving eyes...
PHOTOGRAPHER
UNKNOWN*

It was getting towards evening, and though the Allens invited me to stay to dinner, I said I had another engagement, and Red drove me back to my hotel. It was a wonderful afternoon and an experience I have never forgotten. I think I went to the Metropole three or four nights after this. When we said goodbye I promised to write, and certainly look him up when I was in New York again. Red said he was a bad letter writer and anyhow he didn't have much time for it — something I could well understand.

Ironically, in the three visits I made to New York before Red's death in 1967, I missed him each time. Though his was the regular house band at the Metropole until 1964, in my three visits in that period, in 1963, 1964 and 1966, he was each time on a European tour. After so many years the travel bug had bitten him — but I think also he found the European circuit most lucrative since, in those years, jazz festivals were beginning to boom. He had first taken the plunge when he went overseas in 1959 with a small band led by his New Orleans compatriot, the veteran clarinetist, Kid Ory, who was then 69.



The Kid Ory Band in Europe, 1959, L-R, Cedric Haywood, Henry 'Red' Allen, Bob McCracken, Kid Ory, Alton Redd... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN CHILTON'S BOOK "RIDE RED RIDE: THE LIFE OF HENRY 'RED' ALLEN"

On this occasion he sent me a postcard from London which read: "Hello Clem —here at last! We've played in Zurich, Paris and Berlin. Now in London. A swell city this. Lots of jazz. Best wishes. Your friend, Red." This was one of the only two letters I got from him though I wrote at least half-a-dozen, filling him in on the jazz scene in Australia, and asking him to let me know what recordings he had made. But the other, previous letter was much more important:

*1351 Prospect Ave
Bronx N Y City
29th April 1957*

Dear Clem,

Sorry I haven't answered the letters you've sent me so far but I've been real busy, not only at the Metropole, but with a couple of Canadian tours and some dates in good old Chi. Now a few of us, including Milt Hinton, are planning a trip to Europe with Kid Ory and we're quite excited about it.

But a really more exciting bit of news is this for your television programs in Australia. A couple of weeks ago Whitney Balliett, you know he's the jazz writer for the New Yorker and Nat Hentoff rounded up a crowd of us for a show in the CBS Robert Herridge Theatre on TV. They called it "The Sound of Jazz". It went out the other night and Pearlie May (who sends her love) and I watched it, and man it was really something.



On the set of "The Sound of Jazz", L-R, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Gerry Mulligan. Two years before her death Billie was serene, relaxed and beautiful...

It was very informal in the studio, they had invited a few people, Pearlie May was there looking very smart, mostly friends of the musicians and the cameras roved around everywhere and it was like a party, and the jazz was out of this world. Believe me Clem, I know you know the CBS people and you must get this film. I've never heard Billie Holiday, God bless her, sing better. She sang "Fine and Mellow" with a group of guys she really likes — Lester [Young] was terrific and Bean [Coleman Hawkins] and Ben [Webster] too, and there was a young baritone sax guy called Gerry Mulligan — he was great too, he's really coming into this scene.



On "The Sound of Jazz" Red had a small outfit, with he and Rex Stewart sharing the trumpets...

I had a piece at the beginning of the show with a small outfit — Rex Stewart and I shared the trumpets and I sang and Pearlie May said I never sounded better. I had Milt [Hinton] on bass and Vic [Dickenson] and Danny Barker and one or two others. Pee Wee [Russell] and Jimmy Giuffre — man there was a clarinet duet if you like, and Monk really put it on for Basie who was there with his band too. Get it man it's the greatest. Hope to see you over here soon. Your friend, Red.

There were, I found, some copyright complications about the program which took some time to sort out but eventually the program was secured for the ABC. I had met Robert Herridge at CBS in my visit in the previous year and this helped in the negotiations. When I eventually saw the program it was like seeing Red all over again at the Metropole. He sang and played mightily: it is all there on film I hope for generations to come. And Red was quite right about Billie Holiday. When viewers knew of the privations and disasters of her life, to see her two years before her death, serene, relaxed and beautiful, singing, smiling and nodding her head in appreciation of her beloved Lester's elegant saxophone phrases, was one of the highlights of the

program. This film has rightly been described, even after 30 years, as one of the most memorable hours in jazz television history.



Semmler had met Robert Herridge at CBS on a previous visit and this helped in the negotiations to secure “The Sound of Jazz” for the ABC... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Red died at his home on 17 April 1967. One of my CBS friends wrote some weeks later to tell me of his passing. I wrote to Pearlie May but had no reply: perhaps she had moved back to New Orleans where, she had told me at our meeting, she had 13 relatives on each side of her family. Whenever now I play a recording of Red Allen with one of his jazz groups, or listen to one of his solos with the Luis Russell or Fletcher Henderson band, these memories come flooding back on me. To me, it is yet another example of how jazz has enriched my life.

Other articles on this website which may be of interest:

Clement Semmler, “Oh Play That Thing!” at <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-98>

Clement Semmler, “Dick Hughes”, at <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-21>

Eric Myers, “Clement Semmler: The Forgotten Jazz Pioneer” at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-6>

Clement Semmler, “Eric Child, 1910-1995” (Obituary) at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-6>