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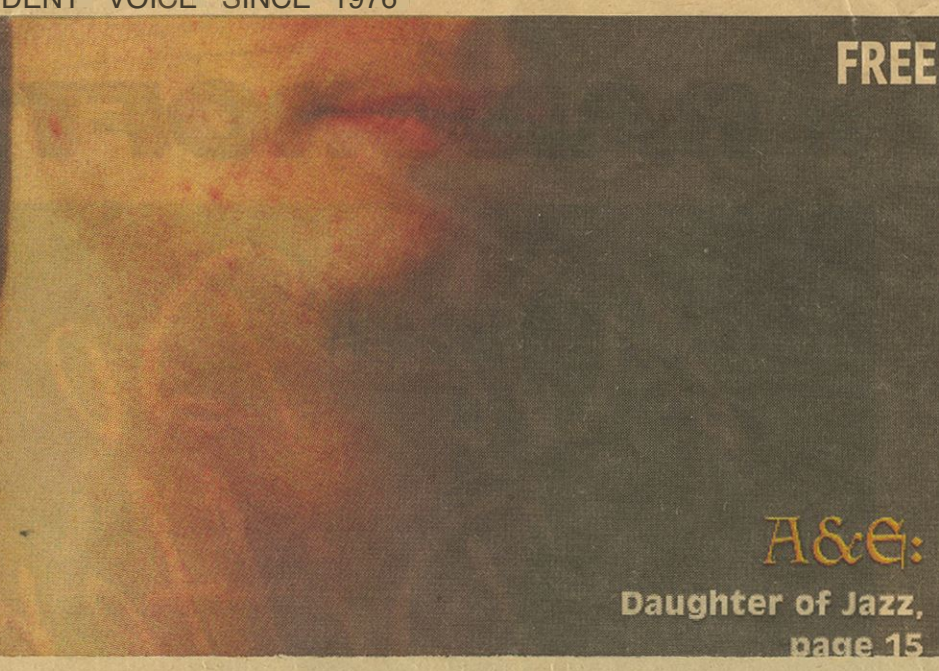

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When Nite Hawks made shadows dance

ILLUSTRATION BY JEANNE KOWAL

Ernestine Gray s lullaby of jazz

By Chet Williamson

In the wake of *Jazz*, the marathon documentary by Ken Burns, many local fans of the music are beginni n; teX **wonder what happened in their own** b~1yard. Theres been a lot happening. WritelS, histori!"ii§ and musicia';\" have been piecing together the story glFjazz in Worcester for decades.

And then theres Ernestine Gray. She grew up in a family of musicians and views the work of prese rv:ng m~i:j ry as a chance to petSOnally hand down th~egL y to ne J children and grandchildren.

'Jazz music is my life," she say~taking a seat in the office of her Mashpee home. "I've been surrounded by music from the day I was born. My dad was Freddie Bates."

Before he marched off to WWII, at the age of 35, Bates was a popular saxophonist and bandleader of the Nite Hawks, said to be one of the area's first jazz groups. The band was staned in the 1920s by Boots Ward and handed down to Ray Schuyler before Bates took over around 1930.

"My mom came from Cape Cod," Gray says. "I do an awful lot of Iwork researching} material about my mom's family, tliz first Americans, that lived here thousands of years ago."

Graywas. born in Worcester, but did not grow up here. Her parents divorced when she was three, and she subsequently spent her childhood traveling back and forth between Cape Cod and the city.

Encitde, d by stacks of papers and folders, historical documents and photos, Gray says although she spent several decades away from the Cape after growing up there, she returned to find her roots.

For the past 20 years she has dedicated her life to preserving her Wampanoag heritage. And for nearly a decade, she had been a member of the Mashpee Historical Commission.

A petite woman in her '70s, Gray has a spring in her step that belies her age. Her memory is sharp and her conversation expansive and expressive. Speaking rapidly in an articulate manner, she skips effortlessly between her African-American and Wampanoag histories, peppering the conversation with generous spills of laughter.

"My mom was Marion Hanes Bates," she says. "Her marriage brought me into two worlds. My dad's world is Worcester. I'm still putting all his ancestry together. That's going to take me another few years ... With Freddie Bates, I've gone back to the 1700s.

"I find Bateses intermingling with very old families all along the Northeast coast. Then, I find [their] history from the Hassiminisco, the smallest little reserve you ever heard of outside of Grafton."

Gray goes on to say that her mom and dad met back in the late '20s. Men from Worcester traveled to the Cape to do time in the National Guard, at Camp Edwards, which is now Otis Air Force Base.

"The musicians also came down from the city to play dances and they got to know each other. After awhile, my aunt Mildred married a musician from Worcester, Harold Black."

Black was a bass player who also played with the Nite Hawks and was one of a fraternity of musicians who jammed at the famous Saxtrum Club, a storefront in the Laurel/Clayton neighborhood where Plumley Village is today. Early members of the club include Emil Haddad, and the late Jaki Byard, who went on to become one of the world's greatest jazz pianists until his tragic death in 1997.

"Mildred Hanes-Black is my mom's sister," Gray says. "My folks married and I was born in 1928 at Memorial Hospital. At that time, my dad was forming his orchestra and getting a nice little group together. Jaki Byard's dad was in the band."

Because of her enthusiasm and passion for research, Gray has been asked by her friend Miriam Estrella to help assemble her family tree. Estrella is the granddaughter of Mamie Moffitt, one of the more charismatic characteIS in Worcester jazz history. She was a black pianist in the 19205 who led her own band called the 5 Jazz-Hounds.

"When I knew Mamie Moffett, she had her **Chicken Coop restaurant on Summer Street,"** Gray says. "Of coulSe you can't find the location now. Ulurel Street was where my uncle Harold and my aunt Mil lived. All of that area was where my dad, and the musicians and the SaxtrUm Club were ... I remember places where the windows were darkened."

With Estrellas blessing, Gray is hoping to develop the life and times of Mamie Moffitt into a documentary. She is currently searching for financial support on the project.

"I remember my dad,'" Gray recalls, "talking on the phone to his agent, Danny Duggan. You know the--situation then; he wasn't in the union. My dad used to get the jobs no one would want to go to.

"My stepmother, Carolyn Bates, she was like a booking agent out of Worcester. She would go down to Boston **and connect Worcester musicians and get** them gigs here and there."

Does Gray remember what Freddie Bates and the Nite Hawks sounded like?

"They wen', fantastic: she enthuses. "They improvised al~ ! suppose most of their chans were Tommy ~!.w Goodman, Jimmy Lunceford, EISkine Hawkins, L.tfcJsx, Millender or Count Basic. That was the music of the !1"ritclj:;liiiByard did the arranging for my dad's band and he was fresh 'out of high school.

"Wendell Culley, whR played later on with Count Basie, he used to c'Orne **in the house and my mom** would say [to her;;'dad], 'Bring WeIldell in before you leave, so you can put this baby to sleep.' And LCulley] would, 'Woo, wjjb'i wah, wah'.l on his muted t rumpet. And I would fall right Of~"EP.. "

Now, that's what you cal izz life. ❑

Chet Williamson may be reac he at chetw@worcestermag.com.

Details

Who: Toni Ballard, Rockie Blunt Jr., Emil Haddad, Bunny Price, Gene Petit, Ed Shamgochian, Jay Tyer, Jack Wertheimer and Dennis Wrenn, and the Worcester Jazz Orchestra. The author of this article will moderate.
What: Talkin' History: Jazz in Worcester. Then and Now
Where: Alden Hall, WPI
When: Sunday, Feb. 2S, at 2:30 p.m.
Admission: Free

JAZZ TALKIN'

WPI has organized a symposium called Talkin' History: Jazz in Worcester, Then and Now. Rich Falco, director of jazz studies at the college has assembled a panel made up of members of the Worcester jazz community to facilitate an overview, help create an ongoing diaiogue **and to share memories.**

The event begins with a reception in the foyer of Alden Hall on the WPI campus. This will be followed by a performance by the Worcester Jazz Orchestra, segue-**ing into the panel discussion.**

WCCA-TVwill capture the event on film, which will then serve as a permanent record. Copies of the film will be held in the library of the Worcester Historical Museum. --C. W.