

WILLIAM HENRY HUGHES



Veteran trombonist and bandleader William Henry Hughes was born in Dallas, Texas on March 28, 1930. Mr. Hughes graduated from Armstrong High School in Washington, DC, studied pharmacy at Howard University, and worked at the National Cancer Institute, before joining the world-famous Count Basie Orchestra in 1953.

Mr. Hughes assumed leadership of the Count Basie Orchestra in 2003, after the passing of his long time musical companion and fellow trombonist Grover Mitchell. As a tenor and bass trombonist, Hughes anchored what many critics consistently considered to be one of the finest trombone sections in Jazz. Now Hughes has the responsibility of directing one of the storied organizations in American music and maintaining, at the highest level of performance, one of the definitive traditions in Jazz, the Count Basie way.

Recent reviews attest to Hughes success in upholding the Basie standard. Robert Folsom of the Kansas City Star wrote: “The Count Basie Orchestra may qualify as a ghost band, but it showed it is very much alive Friday at the Folly Theatre in front of a near-capacity crowd. Basie passed away in 1984, but four members he employed are still a part of his ensemble: John Williams on baritone sax, Clarence Banks on trombone, Butch Miles on drums and trombonist Bill Hughes as director. They keep the tradition swinging.”

Considering that Hughes first joined the Basie Orchestra in 1953, he is a vital link in that tradition. Excepting a six-year hiatus devoted to his family, Hughes has been a Basieite for all of what is referred as Basie’s New Testament era and thusly is referred to by the current generation of Basieites as Mr. B. With Basie, Hughes toured the world, playing the most prestigious jazz festivals and venues, and contributing to fifteen Grammy winning recordings.

During his Howard years, Hughes was a member of the Howard Swingmasters. Like the Tennessee State and Wilberforce Collegians, the Morgan Aristocrats and the Royal Hamptonians, the Swingmasters wrote a very important chapter in the “pre-history” of the formal acceptance of jazz performance and scholarship at Historic Black Colleges and Universities. Hughes’ Swingmaster colleagues included saxophonist/flutist Frank Wess and bassist Eddie Jones, also important contributors to Basie’s New Testament.

In addition to Hughes many, many Basie credits, including several royal command performances and films, he has recorded and performed with many of the great vocalists in Jazz. They include Tony Bennett, Rosemary Clooney, Nat “King” Cole, Sammy Davis, Jr., Billy Eckstine, Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, Carmen McRae, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughn and Joe Williams.

Bill Hughes is a rarity in modern jazz. Most musicians of his time have concentrated on building their careers in ways that result in their names getting top-billing as soloists and recording artists. Hughes suppressed that musical ego and committed his considerable talents in the service of a musical enterprise he recognized as greater than himself, The Count Basie Orchestra. Howard University Jazz Studies is proud to honor William Henry Hughes, one of Jazz’s unsung heroes.

Married July 6, 1952, Hughes and his wife, Dolores, currently reside in Staten Island, NY. They have three children, six grandchildren and one great grandchild.

The “Swingingest” Band In All The Land



Born in Red Bank, New Jersey, in 1904, William “Count” Basie was not always the fabled Count. He began his career as Bill Basie, an itinerant pianist who made his living pounding the keys in theatres featuring silent movies and touring on the Theatre Owners Booking Agency (TOBA) circuit, a hopscotch run of independent performance venues, in black communities stretching from East to West, North and South.

TOBA was also known as Tough On Black Artists, or less affectionately Tough On Black you-know-whats. In 1927, Basie, then touring with Gonzelle White and the Big Jazz Jamboree, found himself “high and dry” in Kansas City, Missouri. It was unlikely that Basie had followed Horace Greeley’s, actually John B.L. Soule’s, entreaty to “Go West young man” and his destiny was certainly not manifest. As Basie recounted in his autobiography, Good Morning Blues, “I don’t remember what my plans were at that time, but in the meantime I got sick and had to go to the hospital.”

Nevertheless, for a musician of Basie’s inclinations, Kansas City was not a bad place to be stranded. In the 1920s and 30s, Kansas City was headquarters for the territory bands that plied the mid and southwest. KC was also a veritable cauldron for the heady mixture of blues principles, ineffably swinging rhythms and brilliant instrumentalists that coalesced into one of the signature sounds of American music, both popular in its appeal and substantial in its musical import.

Basie quickly fell in with the best of the territory bands, including Walter Page’s Blue Devils and Benny Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra. By 1935, Basie’s destiny was becoming manifest. He had formulated and was leading the band that epitomized Kansas City Swing, The Count Basie Orchestra. Along with the bands of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, Basie’s orchestra would define the big band era.

While the media of that time crowned Benny Goodman the “King of Swing,” the real King of Swinging was undoubtedly The Count. Basie’s achievements, however, would transcend the Swing Era as such. The Basie orchestra evolved into one of the most venerable and viable enterprises in American music, as meaningful in its legacy and continuing productivity as any musical organization of the 20th, and now 21st, century.

Interestingly, the critical consensus characterizes the Basie lineage in Biblical terms, as the Old and New Testament bands. The Old Testament band’s style has been summed as a combination of democratically developed, or head, riff-driven arrangements, dripping with blues essence and relaxed, but relentless, swing that showcased a who’s who of very distinctive instrumentalists and vocalists: Lester Young, Herschel Evans, Harry Edison, Buck Clayton, Dicky Wells, Jo Jones, Freddie Green and Jimmy Rushing among others.

In the early 1950s, The “New Testament” Basie Orchestra rose Phoenix-like from the ashes of the Big Band era. For the last fifty plus years, the Basie Orchestra has been an arranger’s palette. Thad Jones, Ernie Wilkins, Neal Hefti, and Frank Foster, to name a few of the more prominent Basie’s penmen, have added volumes to the Basie Library.

Through them, the Basie repertoire has continued to broaden harmonically and rhythmically, making it more than hospitable to the talents of successive generations of musicians. As Basie allowed for a certain measure of change and for a variety of voices to emerge on the platform he created, his remained the ultimate sensibility.

Since Basie’s passing in 1984, Thad Jones, Frank Foster, Grover Mitchell, and Bill Hughes have led the Count Basie Orchestra and maintained it as one of the elite performing organizations in Jazz. Over the years, the Howard University Jazz Ensemble has performed with several very important Basieites: Frank Foster, Clark Terry, Frank Wess and now Bill Hughes.