

by Gene Santoro

When bassist Milt Hinton died at 90 on December 19, 2000, he was one of the last incarnations of jazz's first century and America's concurrent transformations. Trained in classical technique, like so many black American musicians of the era, young Milton Hinton turned early to jazz. He came of age in Chicago when Louis Armstrong was thrilling clubgoers, and he loved the "hot" music's energy and élan. The life around it featured rich folks slumming with lowlifes, all bending Prohibition elbows with *padroni* like Al Capone. Capone & Co. owned and operated most of the speakeasies in Chicago, then throughout parts of the Midwest

more to me than anything else," he wrote. "I started playing the violin at thirteen and from that point on, whenever something bad happened, I'd go off alone and play my music. It became my religion. It was my salvation and it sustained me."

Following the vaudeville circuits' disappearance and silent movies' yielding to talkies, pit bands evaporated and professional black musicians had few avenues outside jazz open to them. Like the rest, Hinton knew it, and like so many, he more than made the most of it, in his case at the heart of the Swing Era as a Cab Calloway Orchestra mainstay for fourteen years. One of the prime inventors of the "walking" bass—the now-familiar, harmonically con-

direct the Milton J. Hinton Photographic Collection and co-directed the award-winning documentary *Keeping Time: The Life, Music, and Photographs of Milt Hinton*.) The selected shots are gems: among their virtues is how they capture offstage moments few non-musicians would likely have witnessed. Hinton often protested he was no professional lensman, but what's here captures the people and settings and social contexts of a fascinating swathe of America's pop-culture landscape.

In his 90 years Milt Hinton traveled far from Vicksburg, Mississippi, where he was born on June 23, 1910. He was raised by his mother's family, especially his grandmother Mama and Aunt Sissy. His African-

Milt Hinton

where jazz was heard, supplying the booze, girls, drugs, and vibe. As Hinton noted wryly, an alert patron could tell from the number of phones around which nightclubs morphed into bookie joints by day.

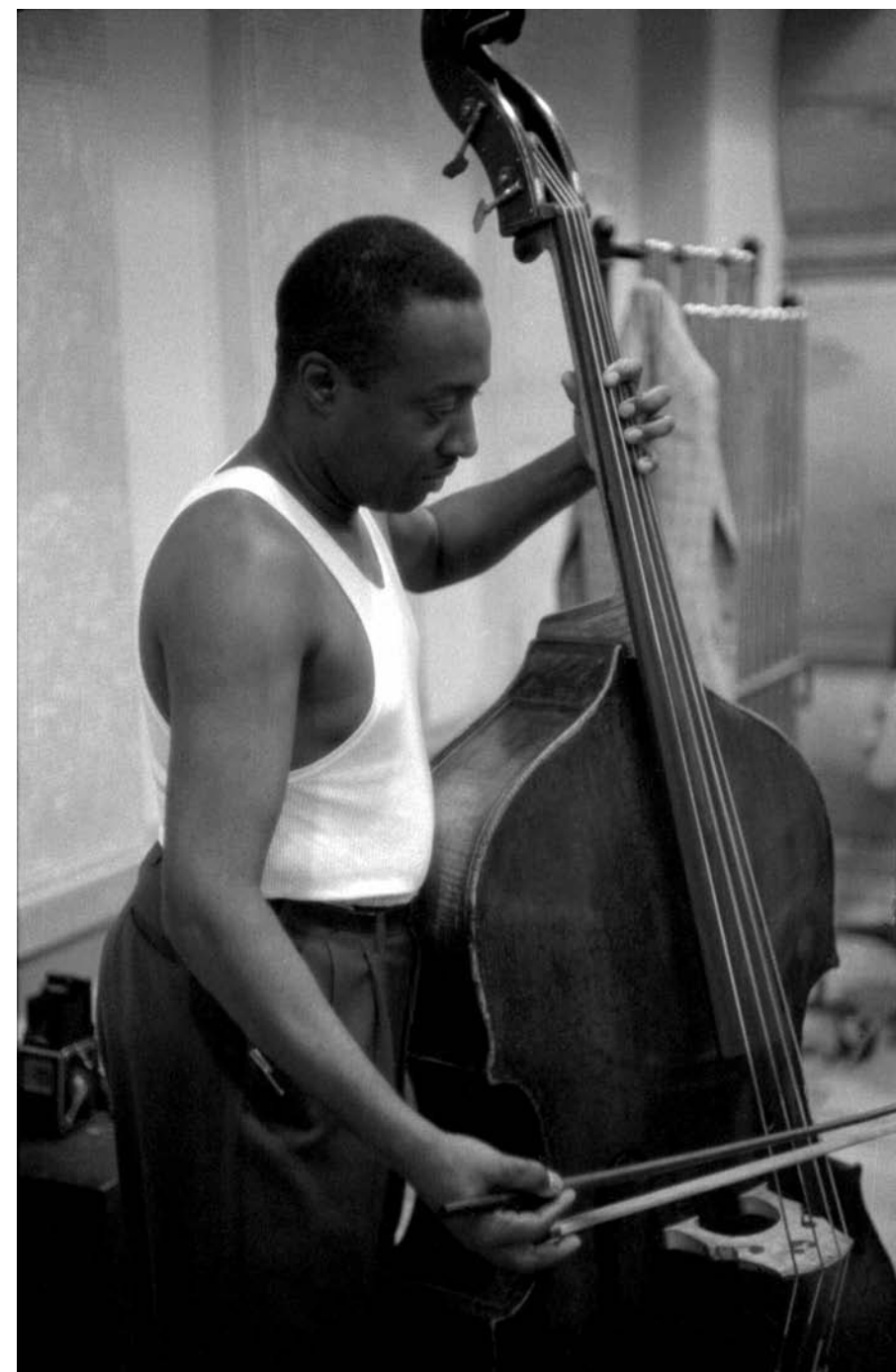
But at 17, with his musician friends flashing money and having fun, Hinton was looking to play. "Music came to mean

toured rhythmic gait as essential to mainstream jazz as legs are to humans—Hinton ultimately made his presence felt on nearly 2,000 recordings. Thus jazz, and American culture, became richer.

But Hinton—"The Judge," as he was known—also became one of jazz's finest in-house anecdotal historians. *Playing the Changes: Milt Hinton's Life in Stories and Photographs* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2008) presents his life and times with incisive insight and droll observation, in Hinton's own words (edited by longtime friend David Berger) and lavishly illustrated with his photos. The beautiful 384-page volume dramatically expands Hinton's lauded earlier book, *Bass Line*. (One hundred forty of these 260 pictures, selected by Berger's wife, Holly Maxson, have never been published before. Berger and Maxson

born father disappeared soon after his birth. His mother was more like "a bossy older sister." His family's momentous move to Chicago when he was nine opened new urban horizons: even though the city (he'd realize later) was highly segregated, black people helped each other, and some were middle class. (Hinton later befriended the painter Jacob Lawrence, whose famed "Great Migration" series memorialized the postwar South-to-North trek of African Americans in search of better opportunities—a quest Hinton's family embodied. Hinton and Lawrence jointly exhibited photos and art in 1990.)

Hinton loved Chicago. He did well at Wendell Phillips High School, especially in music. He worked assiduously at his paper route. And he lapped up Armstrong records via his Uncle Matt, a huge Satchmo



MILT HINTON IN A RECORDING STUDIO, CA. 1953; HINTON'S OWN PHOTOS DOCUMENTED THE OFFSTAGE JAZZ WORLD.

Swing Era. He drew on his violin training and his big ears and his relentless practicing: in one-on-one interactions with equally avid explorers like young Dizzy Gillespie (who shared the formative notions for what became bebop), he worked out the "walking" bass. That opened jazz rhythms and harmonies: rather than dropping root anchors, the bass limned, then varied, the chords of the tune at hand. This guided "hot" music away from the two-beat Dixieland thumping of its tuba-driven past. In the process, "swing" time helped open the music to different styles of dancing (the suave fox trot, the frenzied Lindy) as well as broadening the syncopated scope for composition and improvisation. As nearly always in American pop music, rhythmic changes underlay other developments.

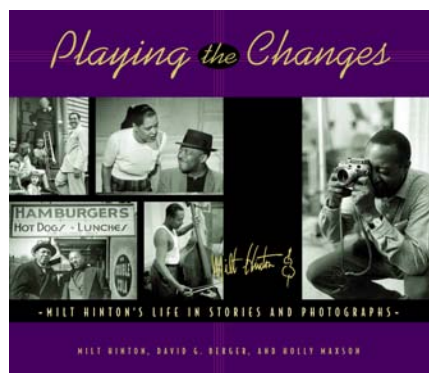
After his first 1930 gig in Chicago with pianist Tiny Parnham, Hinton played with a Who's Who gallery of greats and should've-beens. (His memoir reminds us how many never-weres helped spawn artistic breakthroughs.) There were the peak Cab Calloway years: extended Cotton Club stints, radio broadcasts, class-A tours in a private Pullman with baggage car, sometimes the more usual raggedy coughing buses. For the rest, Hinton graced stages and studios with his early heroes Armstrong and violinist Eddie South as well as Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Dizzy Gillespie, Buddy DeFranco, Benny Carter, Jack Teagarden, Langston Hughes, George Russell, Eubie Blake, Cannonball Adderley, Benny Goodman, Hank Jones, Clark Terry, Sarah Vaughan, Joe Venuti, and Teddy Wilson.

After World War II, the Swing Era crashed: the big band circuit evaporated, and radio switched to recordings rather than live "wires" from shows. Although Calloway, like Ellington, Basie, and Goodman, hung on to the bitter end, Hinton was forced to face economic reality in 1950. Most of the musicians turned loose in the death spasms scrambled. The luckiest scram-

fan. Matt got sixteen-year-old Milt a job at a cleaning and pressing place that was a front for a Capone operation: in the back room, bonded whiskey was cut with twice as much grain alcohol. He recalls, "Whenever [Capone] hit somebody, just before he drove off, one of his lieutenants would hand the guy a twenty-dollar bill." The teen's job ended in near-disaster: a car accident during a hootch run nearly severed

the ring finger on his right hand. Because of his screaming protests, the finger was saved instead of amputated, his mother verbally clawed Matt and him, and, he wrote, "I never had anything else to do with illegal booze, and to this day, I've never driven a car again."

Enhanced by the lure of money and women, music became his life and livelihood. Hinton matured and thrived in the





bled into the suddenly burgeoning field of studio work for TV, radio, and records.

Hinton was lucky, thanks in large part to Jackie Gleason, who insisted on inserting the bassist into the all-white recording crew for his *Music for Lovers* LP. (The white contractor gave the bowing parts to the white bassist, figuring a black jazz player wouldn't be up to the task.) That fragile start let him prove himself, and Hinton translated his self-evident skills into a new lucrative, star-studded world. Along with Benny Carter and Buddy Collette, he became one of the first African Americans to do so successfully. (His pride in this achievement was financial as well as racial.) Among his recording credits were sessions with Nat King Cole, Tony Bennett, Willie Nelson, Frank Sinatra, Patti Page, Eddie Fisher, Teresa Brewer, Paul Anka, the Clancy Brothers, Paul McCartney, Mantovani, Leontyne Price, Pearl Bailey, Sam Cooke, Bing Crosby, Mahalia Jackson, Barbra Streisand, Frankie Laine, and Bobby Darin.

According to Hinton, Darin's version of "Mack The Knife" became a hit thanks to the half-step climbs the session's jazz aces spiced his take with. (Into the 1960s, uncredited jazz musicians worked the bulk of rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and pop studio dates.)

In its turn, the studio work, too, faded, facing the era of self-contained singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan and the Beatles. Advancing technology nailed the coffin, as the huge expense of gathering musicians in a studio became irrelevant. Buoyed by healthy residuals, Hinton returned to jazz and shared the *Götterdämmerung* of his idols and peers until, one by one, they and he passed on.

Playing the Changes is sumptuous, charming, entertaining, and immensely informative; its tales of *temps perdu* are uproarious, sly, revealing, respectful, and bittersweet, but almost never bitter. The quotidian textures Hinton conveys in his words and pictures pulse with genial yet

HINTON'S PHOTO OF TROMBONIST/
VIBRAPHONIST TYREE GLENN AND
SAXOPHONIST CHU BERRY;
NORTH CAROLINA, CA. 1940

shrewd behind-the-scenes looks at family, friends, touring, clubs, studio work, thugs, music-biz types, and paychecks; all resonate, distinctively and rarely heavy-handedly, against frames like racism, economics, war, and pop culture. With an intro by Clint Eastwood, a preface by jazz historian Dan Morgenstern, and added treats (a selected discography by scholar Ed Berger, a selected filmography by David Berger, a CD of music and interviews), Hinton's memoir is history that welcomes revisiting.

Gene Santoro is the author of Highway 61 Revisited: The Tangled Roots of American Jazz, Blues, Rock & Country Music (Oxford University Press, 2004).